You Fall Within My Reach

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You Fall Within My Reach

by GhostTour

Summary

It has been millennia since Xie Lian's second banishment.

Millennia since Hua Cheng—the scourge of Heaven, the Crimson Rain Sought Flower, the Supreme Ghost King—slaughtered 33 gods and turned his demonic gaze on the banished Flower Crowned Martial God.

Xie Lian has eluded the Ghost King at every turn. For centuries. Hiding is all he knows. He's gotten very good at hiding.

Podfic available, performed by the dazzling and divine EchoandtheVaskians *ugly cries*

Notes

Hello friends! Welcome to the fic! So...the timeline is a little hazy, so maybe don't look too closely? It's fine, it's fine. It's modern times now, and it's fine!

But thank you so much for being here! I hope you like really a lot of angst and sexual tension. And when I say slow burn, I mean it. Slowwwwwwww burrrrrrn. I am grateful for you!

I’m Very Interested In…Um…Swords

The night unfurled, oppressive and suffocating under the heavy torrent of rain. Roiling clouds parted to reveal the starved husk of the waning crescent moon, and the din of evening traffic gave way to a gentle hum.

The Ghost Realm and the Mortal Realm brushed against one another. Zhongyuan had passed, but the veil between realms was thin, and hungry ghosts still clung to the cobbled streets, bobbing in murky puddles and whistling through the cracks of the ancient bookstore. Goosebumps chased along Xie Lian’s spine.

He sighed as he reshelved books from the cart. Xie Lian kept his head down during the week of the Ghost Festival, never quite sure who—or what—might recognize him and report their findings back to the Ghost King.

It had been millennia since Xie Lian’s second banishment. Millennia since Hua Cheng—the scourge of Heaven, the Crimson Rain Sought Flower, the Supreme Ghost King—had slaughtered 33 gods and turned his demonic gaze on the banished Flower Crowned Martial God.

Xie Lian had eluded the Ghost King at every turn. For centuries. Hiding was all he knew. He’d gotten very good at hiding. And very used to a life such as this. And yet…

…And yet his heart still thrummed every time the bookshop bells chimed the arrival of a customer.

Xie Lian peeked over the classical antiquity section, his blood roaring in his ears. His elbow bumped a tower of dusty books, and they tumbled to the floor. He winced at the sound, holding his breath.

A pretty girl in a yellow raincoat stood at the shop door, her umbrella dripping onto the pocked wooden floors—not a red umbrella, mind. Just a plain black one. And even in the low lantern light of the shop, Xie Lian could see no sign of red robes or silver butterflies. No flash of a demonic cursed scimitar. He’d heard enough about Hua Cheng that he was certain he would recognize the Ghost King if he saw him.

Xie Lian breathed a shaky sigh and ducked down behind the stacks again. San Lang was at the front counter—he would deal with the customer. Xie Lian could stay a while longer within the caverns of bookshelves, beneath low-hanging wood beams and soft lantern light.

Apart from his restlessness, it was a peaceful evening in the shop. The hum of the old books was dreamlike, the smell of woodsmoke and autumn rain softening the night. The dramatic weather—eerie black skies and sinister thunder—could set the very bravest ill at ease. It reminded Xie Lian of a B horror movie he'd watched when he worked at a cinema a few years ago—a strike of lightning, the prelude to the evil entity's arrival. Eerie indeed. But to Xie Lian, the stormy weather was a reprieve. It was stillness. The only remedy for a troubled mind and frayed nerves.

Why, then, was he so on edge tonight? He'd been working at the bookshop for nearly six months now without incident. He'd heard nothing from Mu Qing or Feng Xin about Hua Cheng's potential whereabouts. He usually didn't stay in one place for so long, certainly, certainly, and six months was a long time. The longer he stayed in one place, the higher the risk that one of Hua Cheng's spies would recognise him. And Hua Cheng had spies everywhere, including the Heavens, which was why Xie Lian could not often speak with Mu Qing or Feng Xin. But he seemed to have lost Hua Cheng for now—or at least Hua Cheng was busy tormenting other Heavenly Officials.

Ah, perhaps it wasn't the imminent threat of a supreme level ghost that was bothering Xie Lian tonight. Perhaps, the issue was that he was exhausted. Not as much physically as in his heart—a soul-deep weariness that he couldn't shake. An exhaustion that became the gateway for darker thoughts. When he was on the run, it was easy to ignore the dark thoughts—easy to ignore the aches and loneliness, the despair. But staying in one place for so long had allowed his exhaustion to catch up with him. It allowed him to see what he was missing.

If he was honest with himself, Xie Lian was tired of running. Tired of hiding. And, oh, how he longed to grow roots. How he longed for a home and connections that were more than just fleeting. And he longed, above all else, to be known. To be seen.

Xie Lian sighed and tucked the last book from the cart onto the shelf. He pulled his old white henley down over his frozen fingers and wended through the maze of shelves to the front of the shop.

The girl in the yellow raincoat was chatting with San Lang at the front counter, an excited waver in her voice. Rain battered the ancient pane-glass windows with force, and lightning arched across the dark sky. San Lang gave Xie Lian the side-eye as he took a seat behind the counter.

The girl smiled and tucked her dark hair behind her ear as she described the book she was looking for. A book that sounded suspiciously like the one San Lang had been reading at the counter last week.

“A book about ancient Chinese weaponry? It’s um…actually, I don’t know the author. There was a curvy sword on the front and the cover was red.”

San Lang shook his head. “I don’t know it.”

Ah, but San Lang did know the book! He and Xie Lian had discussed it at length during lulls in the shop last week, both very interested in the subject matter. Why was he telling the girl he didn’t know it?

The girl looked a little surprised and shifted her bag nervously. “Ah, well. I thought I’d ask anyway. I’m very interested in…um…swords. Anyway. If you don’t know the book, maybe you know of another way I can spend my time tonight?”

Xie Lian quickly busied himself with the inventory list to hide his smile. He’d recently taken over the inventory duties as no one else could read San Lang’s horrific writing.

As the pretty girl spoke, Xie Lian couldn’t help but sneak a glance at San Lang. His impossibly long black lashes fluttered, scraping against his pale cheeks, and his eyes—one crimson red and the other as dark as the midnight sky—glittered. San Lang didn’t even try to hide his bored expression, and the girl giggled awkwardly.

When Xie Lian first met San Lang, he’d been mesmerised by him, too—by his sharp features, by the delicate point of his chin, by his jade-white skin. He was tall, so tall—the top of Xie Lian’s head barely reached San Lang’s shoulders. His long black hair, soft as raven feathers, was pulled into a high ponytail, spilling down his back like ink. So beautiful. So, so beautiful. It was painful to look at him.

To the outside world, though, San Lang came off as a little standoffish. Maybe even a little rude, with a smile like knives. Truth be told, he was a handful. But Xie Lian got to see the real San Lang, with his bright smile and eager conversation, a little shy. He was witty—scathingly so. His caustic humour had initially shocked Xie Lian. But no one could make him smile like San Lang. And Xie Lian had never met someone so kind—well, to him anyway. If he was honest, it made him feel a little special that San Lang had singled him out.

San Lang had been hired only a week after Xie Lian had started work at the bookshop. As the owner was rarely around, training San Lang had fallen to Xie Lian, despite barely knowing the ropes himself. As he was explaining the shop's book classification system, Xie Lian had been so taken with San Lang's beauty, he could barely focus on what he was saying. In Xie Lian's defence, it had been weeks since he'd had a proper night's sleep—too afraid the ghosts had followed his trail from Yong'an and too unused to the sounds of his cheap flat to close his eyes. But when San Lang had asked him a question, he realised he'd been staring. No, not staring, devouring the mortal boy with his eyes, like a man starved. Xie Lian's cheeks had burned hot, and he'd looked away, stammering his way through the rest of the orientation.

Since then, Xie Lian had been covert when stealing glances. San Lang hadn't seemed to notice, which should have been a relief. Xie Lian wasn't in any position to be messing around with pretty mortal boys. He'd be leaving soon, anyway. To another city. Another lie. Always alone. Not to mention that anyone who got close to him inevitably suffered the consequences. Hua Cheng was as vicious as the rumours claimed, slaying anyone who might have seen or heard of Xie Lian's whereabouts. Many innocent people had died just for spending a moment or two in Xie Lian's company.

San Lang was beautiful, yes, and clever, and kind, but Xie Lian's simmering feelings for him needed to stay hidden. Unless he wanted to get San Lang killed. So Xie Lian ignored the butterflies in his belly when he saw San Lang—ignored the aching need he felt when San Lang smiled. Xie Lian had never wanted anything or anyone so desperately before, not in thousands of years, and he didn't know what to do about it. So it was best to bury his feelings. Ignore them. Ah, he had a lot of work to do in the shop anyway! There was no time, no time!

"We have a complete section on Chinese history," San Lang said, a fake smile on his face. "I'd suggest beginning your search there."

The customer tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, her cheeks darkening to a beet red. “Or, I mean, thank you. I’ll keep looking…” She trailed off.

San Lang raised both black brows, crossing his arms. The sleeves of his red hoodie pulled up, exposing his intricate butterfly tattoos, and his silver butterflies piercings that trailed the shell of his ear glinted in the low light.

“Yeah, right then. Um…” The girl turned and fled into the dark night, the shop bells chiming her departure.

Xie Lian didn’t blame her for hightailing it. But he secretly admired her for such a bold move—he would never have the nerve. Not in the face of San Lang’s ethereal beauty. Most of the girls who flocked to the bookshop to gaze upon the beautiful heterochromatic boy just blushed and stared, never summoning the nerve to make a move.

“San Lang, that poor girl,” Xie Lian said, his words dampened by the din of rain. She was asking you out.”

San Lang grinned. “Was she, now? I didn’t notice.”

“Mnm. Yes you did. Although, I suppose if you’d been sweet to her, she might have fainted right on the spot.” Xie Lian crossed a few items off the inventory list, ignoring the pang in his heart.

“Oh? Why’s that, Gege?” San Lang leaned his elbows on the counter, propping his chin on his hand. He fluttered his long black lashes.

“Ah, San Lang! So shameless!” Xie Lian sighed, his own cheeks heating. “You must know the effect you have on women when you allow your charm to shine through.”

San Lang’s grin widened, and his pointed eye teeth caught his bottom lip. “Just on women? Gege, you wound me.”

“San Lang!” Xie Lian threw a pen at him, and San Lang laughed, a deep throaty laugh that sent a shiver down Xie Lian’s spine.

“I just don’t have an interest in dating, Gege. When I’m not working late-night shifts at this shop, I’m poring over art history texts or in the studio. And if I have free time, I’d rather spend time with Gege than go on some boring date.”

Xie Lian huffed a laugh, his belly fluttering. “Don’t tease, San Lang!”

“What makes Gege think I’m teasing?”

Xie Lian shouldn’t be basking in the velvety dulcet of San Lang’s deep voice, nor thinking about his pretty mouth. Or his soft smile. Or the way he threw his head back when he laughed, exposing the pale column of his elegant throat. He should be thinking about planning his next move. Somewhere Hua Cheng wouldn’t find him. He hadn’t visited the coast in a few years. Or maybe he could just get on a train and go. See where the moment took him.

Ah, but he didn’t want to leave the capital. He loved this little bookshop, despite its ancient plumbing and electrical, despite the chill and long hours. He loved the smell of the books and the peaceful rainy evenings. He loved laughing alongside San Lang during the slow hours, sharing takeout from a carton or reading while San Lang sketched in one of his moleskines—sketches Xie Lian was never allowed to see.

When Xie Lian had arrived in the capital, fresh off a near-miss with the ghosts in Yong’an, he hadn’t expected to like it so much. It rained a lot in the capital. He was always cold, right down to his bones. But it was the first time he’d felt a semblance of belonging, of home.

Home.

Was such a thing truly possible for him? No. Xie Lian would never have a home. Unless he held his ground and stood up to a timeless monster—the Ghost King Hua Cheng, who wanted

to remove his cursed shackles, strip him of his divinity, and kill him.

Hua Cheng had never even formally challenged Xie Lian as he had the other Heavenly Officials—as he had Feng Xin and Mu Qing. Heaven wouldn't have even known Hua Cheng was looking for Xie Lian, had it not been for one of Jun Wu's spies in Ghost City.

The news had shocked the Heavenly Realm—the Ghost King Hua Cheng was hunting the long lost prince of Xianle, The Flower Crowned Martial God, His Royal Highness, Xie Lian. No one was quite sure what the Crimson Rain Sought Flower wanted with a lowly banished god devoid of spiritual powers. The Scrap Immortal. The laughing stock of the three realms. No one had spared Xie Lian a thought in centuries except to mock him. Or to ponder why on earth Hua Cheng would be interested in him. He was nothing special, after all.

" *For some unknown reason, he's set his sights on you, Your Highness,"* Feng Xin had warned. *"When he finds you, you're as good as dead. He is a tempest that crawled out of the kiln, having slaughtered a million ghosts, and his cursed scimitar drinks blood."*

Mu Qing had been less obvious in his concern. " *What's with you and devastations, anyway? First Bai Wuxiang, and now Crimson Rain Sought Flower. What the fuck?"*

Mu Qing and Feng Xin had every reason to be wary. The Supreme Ghost King was hunting them, too. But they were gods. Xie Lian's spiritual powers were sealed. If Hua Cheng found him, he would be a smear of blood. A memory. The cursed shackle around his neck would not save him.

Xie Lian hadn't said anything, but he suspected he understood Hua Cheng's motivation—he suspected Hua Cheng was from Xianle, and he was hoping to exact revenge on the crown prince for the destruction of his kingdom. Perhaps Hua Cheng had even been one of his believers once. Perhaps he'd died in Xie Lian's pointless war.

The rain picked up, and thunder boomed, the cacophony so loud Xie Lian wanted to cover his ears. With a bright-as-day flash of lightning, the shop lights went out, casting them into darkness.

San Lang cursed under his breath. Xie Lian could hear him rummaging in the drawer, but the shop was black as pitch, and he shivered, a cold pit forming in his stomach.

His heart raced, and he grasped the hem of San Lang's sleeve. Were the ghosts here? Had Hua Cheng finally found him, prone and unaware in the dark? Would he kill San Lang as he'd killed so many others? As he'd killed Xie Lian's coworkers in the flowershop he'd worked in Yong'an? As he'd killed Pei Xie and Banyue?

A match flared with a hiss, illuminating San Lang's beautiful face, his thin lips, his sharp jaw, the elegant slope of his nose. He lit a beeswax candle in a mug on the countertop—one of his special mugs with the words, 'If she's your girl, why is she answering my riddles three?' across the front.

"Are you feeling all right, Gege? You're quiet tonight."

He looked up to find San Lang watching him, dual-toned eyes shimmering in the candlelight. A dark lock of hair fell across his brow, and he swept it back. This close, Xie Lian could breathe in his scent, like lilacs and smoke.

"En. I'm okay. Just tired." He took a slow breath to calm his racing heart. It was just a storm. He'd weathered many a storm in his long life. This one was no different.

"Let's get Gege home to bed." He locked the cash register. "There's no point in staying open without power."

Xie Lian slipped into his coat with a shiver, strands of his long dark hair slipping out of its bun and tumbling down his back.

San Lang snatched his arm, and Xie Lian gasped. In the flickering candlelight, San Lang inspected the elbow of his coat. The contact surprised Xie Lian. San Lang had never intentionally touched him before. In fact, it often seemed as though he intentionally avoided touching Xie Lian.

Xie Lian looked up at him in confusion. Standing this close, San Lang towered over Xie Lian. He was so warm and smelled so…good. He smelled good. Yes, Xie Lian liked his smell very much, even though it did strange things to his stomach.

"There's a hole in your coat. Two holes." He followed the seam up to Xie Lian's shoulder, his dark brow furrowing. "And another here. Gege, this won't keep you dry."

Xie Lian shrugged, his cheeks burning. "It's fine, San Lang. No need to worry about me, ha ha ha ha. You worry too much!"

San Lang gave him an unhappy look, but said nothing.

Out in the storm, steam rose from the cobblestones, the blackened buildings glistening in the red lantern light. San Lang locked the shop, his shoulders hunched against the rain. Xie Lian was instantly soaked through, but he tried not to let on. The air smelled of rain and exhaust. His stomach growled, and his teeth chattered from the cold.

They passed a noodle shop on their way, the owner listening to the Peking Opera's *Drunken Concubine* at top volume while he folded massive dumplings. San Lang grabbed Xie Lian by the sleeve and pulled him into the shop. The second time he'd touched him in one night—the second time he'd ever touched him.

"Two orders of tofu brains. And a donkey roll," San Lang shouted over the music, leaning against the counter, so tall, so lithe. So devilishly beautiful. His long legs stretched for days, and his black combat boots—unbuckled and untied, the tongue hanging out—made him look a little dangerous. Even though he was drenched, his black hair was sleek and his eyes shone. Xie Lian was pretty sure he looked like a drowned rat.

"Ah, San Lang, you don't have to!"

San Lang pouted. "But Gege, what's the point in living in the capital if you don't sample all the delicacies?"

The shop was hot and humid, and the smell of grease hung in the air. Xie Lian's mouth watered as San Lang handed him a bowl of tofu in gravy sauce in chilli oil, so piping hot, it burned Xie Lian's tongue.

They ate standing at a counter by the window, watching the deluge. Neither spoke as they ate, and when they finished, San Lang took his empty bowl and tossed it in the bin. Xie Lian couldn't help but moan and he took a bite of the donkey rolling on the ground; it was filled with red bean paste and sprinkled with soy flour. It might have been the most delicious thing he'd ever eaten.

"Gege, Gege, let's try the veggie dumplings! This place is famous for them."

Before Xie Lian could protest, San Lang was already ordering two of the largest dumplings Xie Lian had ever seen, and handing the shop owner a handful of change.

"San Lang!"

"Gege wouldn't be so cold all the time if you were getting enough nutrition. This San Lang will take every opportunity to make sure his Gege eats well."

Xie Lian looked down at his worn chucks, his cheeks heating in shame. He didn't have any money to offer for his share, and he couldn't imagine San Lang was any better off; San Lang, too, took home a measly paycheque from the bookstore, on top of which, he was paying for tuition at the University. Xie Lian knew very well how expensive San Lang's art supplies were. And while he'd long suspected San Lang came from money, it still wasn't fair for him to treat Xie Lian all the time without reciprocity.

Xie Lian was used to living in poverty. He was used to starving and not having a roof over his head. He was used to being kicked awake at three in the morning in a dark alley by vagrants searching him for valuables. At least now he had an apartment and a job, even if the job was barely enough to cover his rent. At least he had a warm place to spend his days, with free tea for the staff and plenty of books to read.

And when he needed to leave? Well, there was a certain freedom to it all, really. Xie Lian was beholden to nothing and no one. He could do as he liked, go where he pleased, and as long as he kept his head down, the world was his to explore.

He'd seen incredible things in his journeys, met incredible people. It was a life many people dreamed of, and he knew he was lucky to have it. But sometimes, it could be lonely. And sometimes, he forgot how his lifestyle appeared to others. He forgot how *he* appeared to others, in his shabby clothes, his long hair up in a bun, his skin so pale it was almost translucent. He was too skinny, he knew. Ah, but he'd always been skinny, even when he was a prince. He'd been a picky eater, much to his mother's dismay. She'd often have to coax him to try what was in his bowl, which he'd mostly refused. So spoiled, so spoiled. He was lucky his mother had been so patient.

Sudden and overwhelming emotions welled inside Xie Lian. His throat ached and he stuffed a large bite of dumpling into his mouth.

He could feel San Lang's eyes on him. "Gege…" His voice trailed off. "I am sorry if I offended you. I only worry."

Xie Lian waved his hand, grateful for the mouthful of food. He wanted to meet San Lang's gaze and tell him it was fine, but he was horrifyingly close to tears. Not enough sleep. Not enough to eat.

Finally, when he'd gotten ahold of his emotions, he swallowed. "Thank you, San Lang. I am grateful."

San Lang was the sweetest, kindest person Xie Lian had ever met. Never before had someone shown him such care. But Xie Lian would have to leave soon—leave San Lang behind. Ah, but it was for the best. Xie Lian was a god. A banished god, but an immortal all the same. It was always best not to get too attached to mortals, he'd learned from experience. No matter how intense the connection was, no matter how deep the friendship. No matter how beautiful the mortal.

They finished their late-night snack and left. The rain had let up as they made their way through the cobbled streets, red lanterns bobbing overhead and cafe lights reflecting rainbows in oily puddles. They said goodnight at the edge of the old town, and once San Lang was out

of sight, Xie Lian back tracked, cutting through narrow alleys of the slums, his once-white converse hightops squelching in murky puddles. He really didn't want San Lang to see where he lived. He was used to it, but he knew how it would look to others.

When he reached his building, he took the stairs two at a time, the smell of piss and vomit burning his nostrils, and once inside his dark flat, he locked his door behind him. He wasn't afraid. Despite his lack of spiritual powers, he still had Ruoye, and there were few who could challenge him in a fistfight. He was much stronger than he looked and had thousands of years of martial training. But Xie Lian preferred to avoid all that. It was better not to draw unnecessary attention to himself.

He stood silently for a moment, listening to the pounding bass from his neighbours next door, to the roar of traffic, to the distant sirens, to the screaming drunk couple in the alley below. The linoleum floors peeled beneath his feet. The single mattress that had come with the flat was pulled away from the dripping walls to the centre of the room. He was on the top floor, and the roof sometimes leaked.

With a sigh, he fished his cracked cell phone out of his pocket. Feng Xin had given it to him a few years ago with a stern command to stay in touch. Weekly. No exceptions!

Xie Lian still felt a little guilty about that. He'd stepped into a Nan Yang temple one day to send off a prayer, letting Feng Xin know he was okay. Ah, but he supposed it had been a while without contact. A year? Had he really forgotten to check in for a whole year? Still, he hadn't been expecting Feng Xin to immediately show up and yell at him for an hour. But now he had this marvel of modern technology to stay in touch! He wasn't very good at texting, but it was convenient to have.

But tonight Xie Lian had no new messages, and he breathed a sigh of relief. No news was good news, wasn't it? But Xie Lian's restlessness had grown potent. He curled his fingers around the phone, his skin prickling cold. Something wasn't right. He could feel it. Something was coming. He sent off a string of smiling faces to Feng Xin and got ready for bed.

Wooden Butterflies

Chapter Notes

Hello beautiful friends! Thank you so much for the encouragement! The kudos and comments make me giddy! I will try to respond to all comments, but I've been trying to balance studying and writing, so I'm a bit slow! I hope I'm not wrong in assuming you'd rather have a chapter? But please know, I read every comment over and over with a warm heart! Thank you, thank you!

Posting schedule! I will post a minimum of two chapters a week. Hopefully three! This fic will be around 70k in the end. I really appreciate hearing what you guys enjoyed!

The INCREDIBLE art mid-chapter is by Saenda, and I am forever undone! The most beautiful art I've ever seen.

It can also be seen here!

CW for the chapter: some sexually explicit language and implied sex work.

Xie Lian awoke to a banging on his door. It was still dark, the rain hammering the windows. His throat was raw, as if shredded by a thousand razor blades, and he winced as he swallowed. His scratchy blanket was drenched with sweat, and his skin hurt.

Another bang on the door. Xie Lian jolted, reaching beneath his mattress for the sword Feng Xin had given him.

“Hey pretty boy, you want some company in there?” The words were slurred and raspy. One of the women from the street earlier. “Come on, honey. Let me in. I can suck you off if you have any dust.”

The banging of the door rattled his skull, and he squeezed his eyes shut, sweat pooling along his collar bones. This happened once every few weeks. Xie Lian was used to it. He dropped the sword to the floor at his side with a clatter and winced.

“Come on, pretty, pretty boy. I seen you lookin.”

“Shut the fuck up!” someone shouted from down the hall. A door slammed. Xie Lian braced himself for a scuffle, but all was silent. He would intervene if he had to—if anyone tried to hurt the woman. But after a few minutes more, he tucked the sword away again.

Gauzy moths clung to the window pane, opening and closing their tattered wings in a slow pulse, and for a moment Xie Lian could only stare. He wondered distantly if Hua Cheng’s butterflies would look like this, preternatural as a fever dream. He’d never seen the butterflies himself—he’d only heard tales from Mu Qing and Feng Xin. Death Spirit butterflies. Hua Cheng’s eyes and ears, but also a weapon. Mu Qing said the butterflies could render a man nothing more than a festering puddle of shredded viscera and bone fragments, their wings sharp as blades. Absolutely lethal. Xie Lian shuddered. What would it be like for his body to knit itself back together after that? How long would it take?

Xie Lian climbed out of bed, shivering as he padded to the washroom. He turned on the shower and stared at himself in the cracked mirror. His skin was pale—too pale—his golden eyes bright with fever. His dark hair stuck to his neck with sweat. It wasn’t often he fell ill—not anymore—though he’d had just about every illness imaginable, so this was really nothing. With his cursed shackles suppressing his spiritual powers, he was as vulnerable as a mortal.

He stepped under the spray of tepid water and whimpered. His skin hurt, and his legs shook. In moments like this, he longed for the bathing pools of Xianle—for the assortment of sweet smelling oils and soaps—for the warm breeze coming off the gardens.

When he was sick as a child, his mother would fuss, running him cool baths and rubbing his chest with eucalyptus oils. Memories of his childhood were cracked and dust-covered, but through the haze of time, Xie Lian could almost hear the soft song his mother sang to him. Xie Lian could not remember his mother’s face, but he remembered this—the vibrations of her gentle alto lulling him to sleep. Her fingers through his hair. Her rose perfume.

Without noticing, he hummed the haunting melody to himself—the one his mother had sung to him—though he didn’t remember the words. Ah, time really was a thief, and he was an old man, fading in and out. In and out.

The water pressure dropped off, the temperature now frigid, and Xie Lian began to shiver again. Teeth chattering, he grabbed his ratty towel, and staggered back to bed, goosebumps covering his pale skin.

He tripped on an uneven tile and face planted on the bathroom floor. White lights exploded behind his eyes, and his ears rang, pain blooming along his cheekbone. He lay there for a moment, listening to the rain and the sound of his own heartbeat. Finally, he summoned the energy to pull on sweatpants and a threadbare shirt and climbed into bed.

His phone beeped on the pillow next to him. A message from Feng Xin:

What's with all the smiling emojis? They tell me nothing. Are you still in the capital? Let me know for real if you're okay.

Xie Lian swallowed, squeezing his eyes shut against the pain. He lay in bed until the grey haze of dawn flooded his room.

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The rain had relented, but the chill of autumn seeped into Xie Lian's bones. It was Saturday. The busiest day of the week at the bookshop.

Xie Lian grimaced as he pulled on a pair of worn jeans and a soft black sweater Mu Qing had given him. It was a nice sweater, though Mu Qing had not been nice when he'd given it. Mu Qing rarely bothered to hide his disdain for Xie Lian. Still. The sweater was a thoughtful gift, and Xie Lian rarely had money for nice things.

He partially tied his hair into a top knot, leaving the rest down—a style he used to wear back when he was still a prince. A coughing fit seized him, and he felt as though his ribs would crack. His eyes watered, and he swallowed against the agony of his sore throat. For a moment, he considered the merits of climbing back into bed and staying there, but he couldn't leave San Lang alone in the shop. Saturdays were barely manageable with two people.

Beyond the rain-pebbled windows, the trees were on fire against the stark grey skies. The capital was so lovely in the fall—blackened-red and haunted. Ridged Xieshan rooftops juxtaposed against glass and steel wonders, Shikumen passageways leading to popular shopping districts. The city rested on top of itself in layers of time, modern architecture standing bravely against the ghosts of its bloody history, the air redolent of brine. Magic hummed in the streets, spirits in the sea. Xie Lian wondered what Xianle would look like today if it had survived.

The wind combed through his wild mane of dark hair as he walked toward the shop. He clutched a thermos of green tea with honey to his chest. The world around him was too bright, too sharp—the smell of cooking oil turned his stomach and his head throbbed. He stopped in at the shops, spending his last precious yuan on cough syrup and ibuprofen for his headache.

By the time he reached the bookshop, sweat was trickling down his sides, and he was shivering again. He clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering as the warmth of the bookstore engulfed him. It was already busy, the winding rows of books clogged with shoppers browsing, sipping coffee, escaping the treacherous wind. San Lang was behind the counter with a customer. He looked up as Xie Lian walked by. His glittering mismatched eyes narrowed as he watched Xie Lian slip behind the shelves toward the back office.

A cunning moongate hid behind a bookshelf at the very back of the cavernous shop. Xie Lian ducked inside the cosy little office and hung his jacket on one of the wood-carved butterfly wings. A time-worn typewriter collected dust on the large mahogany desk. A small hot plate sat in the corner—San Lang sometimes used it to make espresso in his percolator, as he refused to drink instant coffee. The walls were lined with more books—special editions, out of print classics, and tattered tomes in ancient languages. Some illegal banned books. The office smelled of leather and anisole. Of wood smoke and jasmine.

The shop's mysterious owner, Gorgo, whom Xie Lian had only met a handful of times, was an avid collector of rare books. Sometimes Xie Lian liked to come in early and visit his collection. He had a favourite anthology of ancient poetry he liked to page through, though sometimes it left him feeling melancholic. Many of the poems were written by Xianle scholars.

Another favourite was a book of art, surely from the ghost realm. Its cobweb pages were painted with rust-coloured illustrations of terrible and violent scenes, likely painted with real blood. It reeked of demonic qi. Xie Lian wondered if Gorgo knew it was real.

There was a chance Gorgo himself was a ghost—a very good chance. The Ghost Realm and the mortal realm were not so far apart in these modern times. Gorgo had a curious nature. He was a recluse, and his tendency to forget which decade he lived in, his inclination to speak in a variety of accents, his obsession with the bubonic plague, were all clues that he was probably a very old ghost. Whether or not he knew who Xie Lian really was—a banished god of old—was yet to be determined. Xie Lian preferred not to be recognised, especially if

Gorgo had any connections to Crimson Rain. It was clear Crimson Rain was also a very old ghost.

Xie Lian chased an ibuprofen with another mouthful of tea and grimaced as it went down like jagged glass. After a swig of horrid cough syrup, he settled his wild hair, and stepped out into the busy shop.

A wave of dizziness caught him off guard and he leaned against a shelf for a moment to steady himself. Beads of cold sweat pricked along his hairline and he worried he might faint. But after a moment, the dizziness passed, and with shaking hands, he began reshelving books from the cart.

Through the stack of books, he spied San Lang at the front counter, nodding as a customer spoke. He looked particularly nice today, his wild black hair messier than usual, thrown up into a high ponytail. He had so much hair, thick and tousled and long—Xie Lian's fingers itched to touch it. Was it as soft as it looked? Xie Lian blushed at the thought. What was wrong with him today? This flu must be addling his brain.

He leaned against the shelf, resting his chin on his hand as he watched. San Lang looked unhappy. His smile was usually so bright and infectious, but today, an air of gloom hung about him. In that moment, his gaze shot to Xie Lian's, and Xie Lian just about fell backward, the stack of books toppling over.

Silently berating himself, Xie Lian replaced the pile to the cart and continued on.

"Excuse me, miss?" A skinny boy with impossibly thin wire glasses stood behind him. When Xie Lian turned around, the boy blanched, then he blushed. "Um, I mean, sir? I'm looking for Outlaws of the Marsh?"

Xie Lian nodded and led him to the classics section. His head was swimming, and he tried desperately not to cough all over the customer. After plucking the book from the shelf for the boy, he returned to the cart. Another wave of dizziness crashed over him, and he swayed, his knees giving out. Strong arms caught him before he hit the floor.

San Lang pulled him to his feet and held him close. He looked down at Xie Lian, his blood-red eye and onyx-black eye filled with fury. Xie Lian had never seen him look so unhappy.

Oh, but he was tall. And strong. Xie Lian could let go, and San Lang would catch him—he knew he would. Butterflies exploded in his belly, and his heart squeezed. San Lang narrowed his eyes, and a shiver went through Xie Lian—from San Lang's touch, from the look he was giving him, or from his illness, Xie Lian didn't know. The cough syrup must be going to his head.

"What happened to your face?" San Lang hissed, narrowing his gaze. Xie Lian knew San Lang was self conscious about his red eye, but it was just too pretty. Too, too pretty. So luminous!

San Lang ran the pad of his thumb along the cut where Xie Lian had hit his head on the bathroom tiles, and he shivered. "I...I fell. It's fine, it doesn't hurt. I…ah…ha ha ha, I'm quite clumsy, San Lang. I'm sure you know this by now."

San Lang didn't relent. Without another word, he pulled Xie Lian toward the back with more force than was necessary.

"San Lang?"

"What are you doing here?" San Lang had to almost bend in half to duck into the moon gate. His grip on Xie Lian eased as guided him gently into the leather wingback chair, and Xie Lian sank back into its buttery-soft depths. San Lang pressed his hand to XIe Lian's forehead. "You're burning up. Why aren't you at home in bed?"

"It's Saturday." Xie Lian shrugged as if that explained it all, and a fit of violent coughing seized him.

San Lang cursed under his breath.

"That fucking raincoat," San Lang muttered. "I should burn the damn thing. Saturday or not, I could have done without you."

“Maybe, but I can’t do without the paycheque,” Xie Lian joked. He attempted to stand, but all the blood rushed to his head, and he swayed, his body flushing hot then cold. His teeth chattered.

San Lang grabbed his hoodie from the butterfly hook and draped it across Xie Lian’s lap. Out of the corner of his eye, it looked like one of the wooden butterflies that clung to the coat hook fluttered its wings. A chill went through him. Cough syrup didn’t agree with him.

“Gege, rest a while. I’ll bring you some tea once the rush dies down.”

“You can’t handle the rush all by yourself, San Lang. I’m well enough to—”

“Rest, Gege. If I see you out there again, there will be trouble.” He gave Xie Lian a hard look. “I mean it.”

Xie Lian flushed. “Sounds serious.”

Carefully, San Lang tucked the sweater around Xie Lian’s shoulders. It was so warm and soft. The wingback chair was so wide and squishy. His entire body melted into the leather, and he sighed.

Xie Lian closed his eyes, just for a second. When he opened them again, the lights were dimmed and San Lang was gone. His body was so heavy—his eyes were so heavy.

He jolted awake to the sound of the door opening, wooden butterflies scattering. Xie Lian blinked. San Lang ducked inside the office, carrying a steaming mug of something that smelled incredible—of ginger and sesame. He knelt before Xie Lian, concern in his pretty mismatched eyes.

“Did I fall asleep?” Xie Lian croaked. His throat burned, and his head throbbed.

San Lang frowned, his pretty mouth twisting. “Have you eaten yet today?”

“It hurts to swallow.”

The shop bells clanged, and San Lang glanced over his shoulder. He handed Xie Lian a large brown mug full of soup. Xie Lian immediately recognized the mug, which said “Fuck Off, I’m Gardening” across its pot belly. Xie Lian had found it in a thrift shop and thought San Lang might find it funny. He clutched it, breathing deeply of the savoury broth.

San Lang watched him with uncertainty for a long moment. “I’ll return soon, Gege. Please rest.”

And then he was gone once more. Xie Lian ate the soup between coughing fits. It was agony to swallow, but the hot supper made him feel more human. He set the empty mug carefully aside and closed his eyes again, slipping back down into troubled dreaming.

He was in a whirlwind of butterflies, their silvery wings slicing his skin, and he screamed. Wild flowers crushed beneath his bare feet, and the floral perfume filled the air. A tall figure stood in the storm’s eye, dressed in vivid crimson robes, decorated with silver jewellery. His black boots chimed as he turned. Xie Lian held his breath, his heart thrashing against his breastbone. The man’s face…it wasn’t a face, but a half-smiling, half-crying mask. The man behind the mask whispered something, but Xie Lian couldn’t hear over the murmuration of butterfly wings.

Xie Lian’s skin prickled, and his eyes felt hot. There was an unbearable restlessness to his dream, but he stayed perfectly still. The half-smiling, half-crying mask melting down the calamity’s face. If Xie Lian stayed long enough in the dream, he would see what was underneath.

A cool hand pressed to his forehead, and Xie Lian moaned.

“I have to…I have to…” Xie Lian sobbed, his throat raw. “Hua Cheng…he’s…he’ll kill San Lang!”

“Shh, Gege. You’re having a nightmare.”

The gentleness of the familiar voice pulled him out of the clutches of sleep, and his eyes fluttered open. San Lang looked down at him, his gaze filled with a strange kind of darkness. With long, elegant fingers, San Lang swept Xie Lian’s sweaty hair from his face. Xie Lian’s heart stuttered.

“What time is it?” Xie Lian muttered, sitting up. His head felt like it was packed with gauze.

“It’s late, Gege. The shop’s closed. I’ve just finished with the inventory.”

Guilt and panic consumed Xie Lian. The inventory was his job. “You worked the whole day with no help and then did the inventory?”

“En.”

Xie Lian sighed. “Gorgo is going to fire me.”

“And how will Gorgo know that you slept in the back office all day like a sloth while I did all the hard labour?” San Lang smirked, and oh how the sight of the smile relieved him. Xie Lian was suddenly starved for levity, despite the pounding against his skull.

“Ha ha ha, San Lang, thank you for all your hard work. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Will this San Lang receive a reward?”

“En. You deserve a reward. What will San Lang ask for?” Xie Lian smiled fondly, his eyes watering and his head pounding. Normally he wouldn’t have allowed for this kind of teasing, no matter how much he longed for it.

“Mnm, Gege, let me think about that. I need to use my wish wisely when Gege isn’t so, so sick.” San Lang’s eyes sparkled, and he helped Xie Lian to his feet. “Arms up.”

“Huh?”

“Arms up, Gege,” San Lang repeated. “We can’t have you getting cold again.”

Xie Lian lifted his arms into the air awkwardly, and San Lang pulled the red hoodie down over his head, his fingers brushing Xie Lian’s sides. A shiver chased over Xie Lian’s skin that

had nothing to do with the flu. The sweater was much too large on Xie Lian, but so warm, and it smelled like San Lang. Like lilacs and smoke. Xie Lian swallowed hard, fighting the urge to collapse into San Lang's arms. His defenses were down, his emotions too heavy. His mind was so foggy, he worried he'd make a bad choice.

"Come on, Gege, I'm taking you home." San Lang threaded their fingers together, and pulled him toward the moon gate.

The wooden butterflies on the coat hook twitched their wings as they passed by.

Darker Theories

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the comments and kudos! I promise I will respond to them all. I'm just a little slow. But they FEED. MY. SOUL. Next chapter on Friday!

CW: implied references to sex work, metal illness, and addiction.

Xie Lian's converse sloshed through leafy puddles, rain soaking his hair and dripping down the back of his sweater. Red lanterns swayed above them, leftover from the festival. Rain hung suspended in the air, and for a moment, Xie Lian thought he tasted magic.

San Lang threaded their fingers as he led him down a narrow passageway and down an even narrower set of stairs. So many touches all of a sudden. Xie Lian had thought San Lang didn't like to be touched. He tried not to think about how cool San Lang's long fingers were against his feverish skin, how comforting. The passageway smelled of decay and cooking grease—of burning metal, of ghosts. Spirited curls of graffiti incongruously decorated the staid shikumen walls, drawing Xie Lian's eye. Farewell poetry. Ah, lovely. But not so lively afterall. Xie Lian's heart panged.

The agony of his blistering throat had gotten worse. Xie Lian's eyes watered as he tried not to cough—once he started coughing, it was hard to stop. He pulled the bottle of cough syrup from his pocket and tipped it to his lips. It was empty. Had he really drunk the whole thing? His body was sluggish, but his blood vibrated with medication.

San Lang muttered something under his breath, wrapping an arm around Xie Lian's waist—more touches. "Gege, you're so sick. I should have just taken you home sooner."

"San Lang was busy running the shop all by himself," Xie Lian croaked. San Lang was so tall. So tall. Xie Lian craned his neck to gaze up at the ethereal mortal boy. It was easy to imagine him as a god. In another life, maybe San Lang could have ascended. "Besides, it's just a little cold. I'll probably be fine by tomorrow."

It took Xie Lian a moment to realise his pocket was vibrating. He fished his phone out and looked at the screen.

He didn't think he would ever get used to modern technology—to televisions and the internet, to aeroplanes and social media. He was an old thing, resistant to change…incapable of change, really. Time was a furtive beast—it moved in gasps and starts, propelling the world forward, and Xie Lian with it. It was a lonely sensation, and sometimes he longed for the simpler times, when the earth was sparsely populated and the air smelled of pine rather than exhaust. When music was gentle and the nights were quiet.

Ah, but cell phones weren't really so different from the communication array, were they? At least he could choose to answer or not, which was nice. Though he usually did, when he remembered to take his phone with him.

He glanced down at the display. It was Feng Xin calling. Ah, he'd forgotten to respond to his message last night, so lost in the haze of his flu. Guilt pitted in his belly. Feng Xin was trying. He was really trying, and Xie Lian hadn't been very receptive toward him. It was just that, ah, spending time with Mu Qing and Feng Xin was the loneliest sensation of them all.

"Gege has a phone?" San Lang asked, his dark eyebrows shooting up. "And didn't give San Lang his number? Gege, I am hurt!"

"Ah, hahaha yes, but I don't often use it. I forget I have it most of the time."

"Mnm. Is Gege going to answer?"

Xie Lian sighed and accepted the call.

"Your Highness!" Feng Xin shouted and Xie Lian jerked the phone away from his ear.

"Feng Xin, sorry, sorry. I forgot to respond to your message." Xie Lian watched San Lang out of the corner of his eye. It was too dark to see his expression properly, but the darkening of

San Lang's eyes and the thinning of his lips was hard to miss.

"What's wrong, Your Highness? You sound horrible."

"No, I'm fine. Just a little cold. I'm, ah, on my way home now to rest."

"Where's home? You never answered. Are you still in the capital? I need to know where you are."

"Still in the capital, yes. Working in a bookshop."

"What? In a bookshop? Why? Do you need…do you need money?"

Xie Lian's cheeks burned, and not from the fever. He glanced at San Lang again, but the beautiful mortal boy was staring straight ahead, not paying him any attention. "No, no, I'm fine, Feng Xin. All is well. All is well."

"Yeah, yeah. Everything is always well, and you're always fine." Feng Xin grumbled. "Your Highness, that's not why I'm calling. There has been a new development."

"Huh, what?" He tried to analyse Feng Xin's tone. He sounded strange. Far away.

"Does the town of Tonghua hold any relevance to you?"

The back of Xie Lian's neck prickled. He didn't like where this was going. "It does. I lived there for a time nearly five years ago."

"Fuck. Fuck!" Feng Xin shouted, and again, Xie Lian had to hold the phone away from his ear. "How the fuck did he know? He's closing in on you again. Fuck!"

San Lang's eyes flashed in the dark. "Gege's friend certainly does shout a lot."

"Who the fuck was that?" Feng Xin barked.

"Ah, ha ha ha ha, just a friend, Feng Xin. He's walking me home." A shuddering cough seized Xie Lian, and it was a moment before he could breathe normally again. "What were you saying?"

"Your Highness, you sound awful."

He wished Feng Xin would stop calling him that. San Lang could probably hear every word he was saying. Feng Xin had never been the quiet type.

"I'm fine, Feng Xin. Please continue. What about Tonghua? You're worrying me."

"It was a bloodbath, Your Highness. Hua Cheng slaughtered the whole town, every last man, woman, and child."

Xie Lian's mouth went dry. He took a shaky breath, phlegm rattling in his chest. His knees were suddenly so weak, he could hardly stand. "How do you…how do you know it was him?"

"Mu Qing and I arrived at the tail end of the slaughter. There was no mistaking him. Tall, red robed, long black hair, and he had that cursed scimitar."

"I—" Xie Lian's heart was thrashing, and sweat trickled down his sides. He still had friends living in Tonghua. People he cared about. His former boss even recently sent him an email inviting him to his wedding. And now? Were they all dead? Had Hua Cheng killed them all to get to him? He closed his eyes as the world came crashing down around him.

“Gege? Gege??” San Lang was calling to him, and Xie Lian realised he was no longer walking, his whole body wracked with shivers.

“There was something else, Your Highness,” Feng Xin continued. “Something strange. Hua Cheng was wearing a mask.”

“A…a mask?” Xie Lian’s voice sounded far away. The city around him sounded far away. “What did it look like?”

“It’s not what you’re thinking. It wasn’t like Bai Wuxiang’s mask. It was just a white mask, painted with a crescent-eyed smile. But no one has seen him wearing a mask before. It doesn’t make any sense. I thought, since he’s pursuing you the way he is, that maybe you would know what it meant.”

Xie Lian’s ears buzzed and his throat closed in panic. Dread pulsed behind his ribs.

Wu Ming.

The white smiling mask.

Hua Cheng…Hua Cheng was Wu Ming. Wu Ming was a Ghost King. A Devastation ranked Ghost King. The Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

Wu Ming.

Xie Lian stood in the dark passageway, shivering. He was soaked to the bone with rain. His belly felt hot and tight. For a horrifying moment, he thought he might vomit.

Distantly, he could hear Feng Xin talking. “Hua Cheng is now very public about wanting to destroy you, Your Highness. All guises have been dropped. I think we should come and get you. Immediately. Tell me where to find you.”

Ah, but now it all made sense. Hua Cheng *was* from Xianle, but he didn't blame Xie Lian for the fall of his kingdom. No. He blamed Xie Lian for what happened next.

Feng Xin was still talking. "...Jun Wu has put a bounty on Hua Cheng's head…"

Memories of Lang'er bay were foggy and muffled, hidden behind walls. Residual grief and shame hummed in his bones. When Xie Lian closed his eyes, he could see a black torrent and a screaming tide, rising to form a tempest, swallowing Wu Ming whole.

He deserved this. He deserved Hua Cheng's wrath. He should just hand himself over before more innocent lives were taken because of him. This couldn't go on…it couldn't go on…

"Gege," San Lang said gently. "Gege, look at me."

"Your Highness? Your Highness?" Feng Xin's tinny voice echoed through the receiver.

The phone was snatched from Xie Lian's hands by long elegant fingers, so pale in the glow of the lantern light. "He'll call you back," San Lang seethed and promptly hung up. "Gege, we need to get you out of this rain or this will turn into pneumonia."

Xie Lian doesn't remember the rest of the walk, though he must have shown San Lang the way. When they arrived at his apartment, San Lang held the door for him and followed him up the stairs. Xie Lian was distantly aware that he should be embarrassed. He hadn't wanted San Lang to see where he lived for a reason, after all. He didn't want anyone to know where he lived, and certainly not Feng Xin or Mu Qing. Normally he wouldn't have let San Lang up the stairs; he would have made him leave, but his head was too heavy to even think about how shabby his apartment was. How dirty and leaky and cold.

The woman from the night before was sitting on the stairs, her sleeve rolled up, her eyes vacant. She still had the needle in her hand.

“Hey, pretty, pretty, pretty boy,” she slurred. “How come you wouldn’t let me in last night? Huh?”

Xie Lian was too numb to respond, though he wished he had something to offer the woman. A mantou or a hot tea.

“Gege, come on,” San Lang prompted.

When Xie Lian closed his eyes, all he could see was a smiling white mask. In the back of his mind, he could hear the howling of thousands of resentful spirits. He stepped clumsily around the woman, and San Lang held his arm to steady him.

San Lang didn’t say a word as they opened the creaky front door. The ancient and draughty windows wailed in the wind, and the radiator clanked—a lot of noise for something that barely put out any heat. The sounds of running water met his ears. The roof was leaking, a steady stream of dirty rainwater slooshed right onto his mattress.

Xie Lian cried out in surprise, and stumbled over the sheets as he tried to push the already sodden mattress out from beneath the spate. But it was too late. It was heavy with water and smelled foul—not that it had smelled very nice to begin with. There was no way he could sleep on it now.

If he stripped the bedding, he might be able to stay awake long enough for the washing machine in the basement to run a cycle, and then he could make a nest on the bare floor with clean bedding…but he had no money left for laundry. He’d spent the last of it on medicine, and pay day wasn’t until Tuesday. Ah, but he could use clothes as blankets. A pile of clothes, with the softest sweater Mu Qing had given him for a pillow. That could work. Yes, yes, it would be fine. Anyway, he’d feel better in the morning. Right now, all he wanted was to sleep.

San Lang stood silently behind him. He couldn’t summon the courage to look his way.

“It’s okay, I have extra bedding—” He choked on the lie. His shoulders slumped.

“No, I don’t fucking think so.” San Lang spoke between his teeth, his voice simmering with rage, the return of his earlier uncharacteristic fury.

Finally, Xie Lian met his gaze. Who was this beautiful and manic creature who stood before him, his raven-dark hair sparkling with rain, his heterochromatic eyes bright with something alarming?

A cockroach ran across the floor and San Lang tracked it with his gaze. “Get your things, Gege.”

Xie Lian felt slow. The room was spinning, and his stomach burned from all the cough syrup. “Eh?”

“I wouldn’t wish this shithole on my worst enemy.”

“Ah, does San Lang have enemies, then?” Xie Lian teased. He’d always been curious. With Xie Lian, San Lang was always sweet and thoughtful, certainly, certainly. A bit of a handful —a bit of a bully—but in a way that Xie Lian always found endearing. And San Lang was oh so gentle. He treated Xie Lian as if he was something precious. Something to be treasured. But he’d seen flashes of cruelty, of rage, simmering deep within the pretty mortal boy. And sometimes San Lang’s smile was wrong. Very wrong.

And now, San Lang wasn’t even trying to hide it. A shiver went down Xie Lian’s spine, though he couldn’t say it was altogether unpleasant.

“Oh, I have enemies,” San Lang said with one of those very wrong smiles. His canines glinted in the half light, his sharp features dazzling to behold, even when drenched in fury. His combat boots splashing in puddles as he crossed toward the plastic crates housing Xie Lian’s clothes. “Gege can come stay with me for a while. It would be this one’s honour to host Gege.”

Xie Lian stood for a moment, his sluggish thoughts spiralling. He should say no. Spending any amount of time with San Lang was putting him at risk. He spent too much time with him as it was. Even working with him was a risk. He needed to leave the capital now. He needed to leave. To get far away.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and the image of a tall figure in red robes, long black hair, a white smiling mask, stared back at him. All around them, blood flowed.

"I can't," he whispered. "I'm…I can't."

"This one insists." San Lang smiled again, but this time his eyes were soft. "If Gege resists, this San Lang wouldn't have much trouble stealing him away."

Something strange fluttered in Xie Lian's belly, a flare of heat, and he swallowed heavily. "I'm tougher than I look, you know. I would put up a fight."

Xie Lian may have been fine-boned and malnourished, but he was still a god. A banished god, but a god nonetheless. People tended to underestimate him. But he didn't mind if it was San Lang.

San Lang wrinkled his nose and grinned. "Gege is the most tough. I'm sure he would give me a challenge. But I would still win, if only to see Gege comfortable and warm when he is so sick. Easy enough to tie you up and sling you over my shoulder."

Another rush of heat in Xie Lian's belly, and he flushed.

"Oh? Does Gege like that idea?"

"San Lang, don't tease," Xie Lian scoffed. "At the risk of sounding mysterious and melodramatic, I really can't, San Lang. You shouldn't hang around me. I'm bad news."

“That’s pretty mysterious and melodramatic.”

“When I say bad news, I mean dangerous. People around me tend to get hurt. I’m not kidding.” It was the most he’d ever admitted to anyone, other than Mu Qing and Feng Xin. The only other Heavenly Officials he’d come across in the last two millennia was the Windmaster and Quan Yizhen, and neither were keen to discuss Hua Cheng. It was a risk to even share this much with a mortal, and nervous tremors went through and through him.

San Lang was silent for a long moment. He watched Xie Lian, a complicated expression on his ethereal face. Rain water splattered the peeling linoleum floors, and the radiator popped and hissed. Down the hall, a couple was shouting at one another. The sound of a bottle smashing.

“Has Gege been alone all this time? Living in places like this?”

Xie Lian jerked his head up. “Huh? What do you mean all this time?”

But San Lang didn’t respond. Instead, he snatched a small duffle bag from the crate and began stuffing it with clothes and the scant few books Xie Lian had purchased at cost from the shop. When he was finished, he took Xie Lian’s hand once more. A shiver went through him as the pad of San Lang’s thumb brushed his palm. His hand was so large, his fingers so long. Xie Lian couldn’t help but imagine San Lang wielding a sword with those graceful hands.

“Come on, Gege. You won’t be coming back here.”

Xie Lian was in a daze as San Lang led him out of the slums and into a more hip and expensive neighbourhood. They came to a charming longtang—a lane of beautiful homes elegantly kept. San Lang led him through a garden scattered with glossy leaves and up to the second floor.

The apartment smelled of wood smoke and books. Of petrichor and incense—a familiar scent that incited melancholia. The kind of incense they used to burn in his temples back when he was a god. It was dark, but the pane-glass windows were thrown open to the lantern-lit street below, and the pitter patter of rain on the leaves was peaceful.

Xie Lian's eyes widened as he took in the space. It was spacious and ornate. Books and half-empty teacups cluttered every surface, but it felt homey. Clean, even. The ceilings were high, with graceful crown moulding, and the wide-plank wood floors gleamed. It was quiet. Still. Xie Lian couldn't imagine what a flat like this would cost. It confirmed his suspicions that San Lang came from a wealthy family.

The walls were exposed clinker brick, painted bright white, which lent a whimsical feeling. In the living room, precarious stacks of ancient books teetered in each corner, and the coffee table groaned beneath the weight of tomes and scrolls. The low lamplight cast a warm glow on the leather furniture, and on the walls hung pieces of art, the likes of which Xie Lian had never seen. Contemporary, abstract, traditional… one in particular caught his eye. An oil painting of a cultivator with white robes and long brown hair. His back was turned to the audience as he stared out over a field of white flowers.

"Lovely," he muttered to himself.

Despite the many different styles of painting, Xie Lian couldn't shake the notion they'd all been painted by the same artist.

San Lang busied himself removing cushions from the red leather couch. He pulled the seat up, revealing a hideabed. Without a word, he disappeared down the hall, returning a moment later with a neatly folded stack of clean bedding. He meticulously made the bed as Xie Lian watched idly by, likely with a pained expression on his face.

This all felt like a dream. No one had ever cared for him like this—not since he was a little prince. But here San Lang was, making a bed for him. Making sure he ate. Making sure he was warm. It made him ache. It made him want things he had no business wanting. He was so selfish. Being here was selfish.

"San Lang?" Xie Lian said.

San Lang finished with the bed and rose to his full height. He frowned. “I’ll make tea. You’ll find the shower just down the hall.”

“San Lang!”

His mismatched eyes were bright with rage, shimmering with the depths of the infinite universe. “I wasn’t about to leave you in that dump. Gege is much too lovely for such a place, bad news or not.”

“Okay. But only for tonight.” Xie Lian’s shoulders slumped with exhaustion. He grabbed the duffle bag San Lang had packed him and found his way down the narrow hall.

Xie Lian stood for a moment in the large washroom—a washroom larger than his whole apartment. The heaters hummed softly, and the heated tiles warmed his icy feet. His body thrummed with cold medicine and his head pounded. His ancient heart hissed and spit, but his thoughts were muffled by anxiety and grief, as though his head was packed with gauze. He couldn’t think past his despair, and exhaustion weighed him down. Rain hammered the slanted windows as Xie Lian stripped out of his sopping clothes. They fell to the floor with a heavy splat.

His teeth chattered as he stepped under the spray of the shower, and painful goosebumps rose on his pale skin. The water in his own building was never this hot. He turned the temperature as high as she could stand it—until it scalded his skin. Despite his exhaustion and the weakness of his limbs, he washed his too-long hair. It was almost to his waist again, as it had been a thousand years ago. The jasmine scent of San Lang’s shampoo was familiar and comforting, but his throat ached with unshed tears.

Wu Ming. How often had he thought of the ghost who had taken the howling torrent of resentful spirits upon himself? The young soldier who sacrificed himself for his beloved? Ah, and his Wu Ming had survived. He’d survived, and the resentment lived on within him.

How often had Xie Lian thought of his own sins, his own selfish mistakes. Xie Lian deserved his wrath. He deserved whatever Hua Cheng had in mind for him.

There were many theories, of course, many of which Xie Lian had learned from Shi Qingxuan. The Heavenly court liked to talk, to speculate. Especially about something as compelling as a ghost king seeking vengeance upon a god. A banished god. A useless old relic—these details only added to the intrigue. Some thought it would be the standard execution, as it had been with the other 33 gods, and Xie Lian would be sliced to ribbons by the devastation's cursed scimitar E Ming. Could he survive that? Xie Lian wasn't sure, actually. Other's proclaimed that Hua Cheng would keep Xie Lian as a pet, to torture and tease as he saw fit. There were other darker theories, but Xie Lian didn't like to think about those.

He shouldn't be here. It wouldn't have killed him to spend the night on the floor in his dreary apartment. He'd suffered worse. He'd suffered so much worse. But something about San Lang made him weak…made him selfish in a way he'd never allowed himself to be before. He was risking so much by allowing himself this one comfort. This one night of peace. One night to pretend.

But he'd caused so much death with his cowardice. So much bloodshed with his selfishness. He'd stayed in the capital too long.

It was time to leave.

Wu Ming, Wu Ming. Oh.

What had Xie Lian done?

So Much. Enough.

Chapter Notes

Not me posting at the last possible minute on Friday.

This chapter is dedicated the the WONDROUS Saenda, who has made my life complete with the world's most beautiful art for chapter two!

Peep it here, folks!

Feast your eyes upon its glory! I won't lie, I cried like a baby when I saw it. Their faces! THEIR BEAUTIFUL EMOTION-FILLED FACES! Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Saenda.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Most of the time, Xie Lian tried to avoid looking at himself in the mirror. He hated the look in his own eyes, the tense fragility and hollowness. He only caught a glimpse of the haunted look on his face as he wrapped a quivering Ruoye around his neck to hide his cursed shackle—his wide golden eyes and too-pale skin. He was bordering on gaunt, and his thick, wild hair made him look unhinged. It wasn't the face of a god, nor a prince. Not someone who would stand up to a murderous ghost king.

At some point in his long life, Xie Lian had become a ghost himself, for what proof of his own existence did he have? He'd grown no roots, carried with him nothing from his past, apart from a silk bandage positively dripping with resentment—no one even knew his name anymore. Sometimes he just wanted to hear someone say his name: Xie Lian.

He'd made his mark on the world once, certainly, certainly, but his infamy had faded from time. It was as if Xianle had never existed—the Flower Crowned Martial God didn't exist. Xie Lian lived in a modern world where no one knew him. He didn't even know himself.

He shuddered as he pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt with a smiling mushroom wearing sunglasses on it he'd thrifted. His skin hurt. His throat hurt. His head hurt. Ah, but he

was spiralling into darkness. What he needed was a good sleep and a hot cup of tea. Tomorrow, the world would be a brighter place. He was just under the weather. That was all.

He padded down the dark hall back toward the living room, following the low lamp light. San Lang was sitting cross-legged in one of the arm chairs, sketching away in his tattered book. He'd taken his hair down, and it spilled around his shoulders, down to his waist, in velvety black feathers. His crimson eye caught the light, his impossibly long lashes fluttering as he glared at whatever it was he was drawing. He looked up, and their eyes met. San Lang's grin was sharp, but something uneasy lingering in his gaze, as if he carried a heavy burden. How could such a vibrant young man hold such a look?

He rose to his feet, discarding his sketchbook on the seat of the chair. "Into bed, Gege."

Xie Lian huffed an indignant sigh as he clambered into the couch-made-bed. Ah, but the bedding was so soft and warm and smelled delicately of lavender.

San Lang sat on the edge of the bed next to him, resting a bowl of ripe peach wedges on the table, and handing him a steaming mug of tea. This mug said, "not the worst employee" across the front, and Xie Lian smiled fondly. He'd left this mug in the bookshop a few months ago. San Lang must have swiped it, the shameless fiend!

"If Gege is thinking this mug looks familiar, I can assure him it is only the fever. This isn't a mug he's ever seen before. This San Lang is very innocent."

"Oh? Hmm." Xie Lian smirked and took a sip of tea. He winced as he swallowed, his throat blistering. But the tea was nice. Lemon and ginger with a hint of something stronger. Whiskey, maybe? Xie Lian didn't consume alcohol, well, not very much, but this would hopefully help him sleep. "Thank you, San Lang. This is, ah…thank you. I'll have to find a way to repay you. You shouldn't have to be stuck at home on a Saturday night, tending to this old man."

"Gege, how old are you, even? 20? 22?" San Lang grinned. His silver butterfly earrings caught the light, tinkling softly as he moved.

“Old enough to be your Gege,” Xie Lian retorted and took another sip of tea, squeezing his eyes shut against the pain. His lungs felt sticky, and his blood burned with fever. When he opened his eyes again, San Lang was watching him with worry written across his face.

“Anyway. Gege can repay me by resting and getting better. Maybe eat a little something.”

“Ah, San Lang, I don’t think I can eat. It’s still quite painful to swallow. And you know what they say, starve a fever, feed a cold.”

“Don’t they also say the way to a gege’s heart is through his stomach?”

Xie Lian batted at him, his cheeks burning. What a shameless flirt he was! San Lang smirked, baring his fangs.

The lamps flickered and the soft pattering of rain in the trees crescendoed to a roar, hammering the glass and the cobbled streets below. Xie Lian sighed and snuggled deeper into the blankets, suddenly grateful not to be in his flooded flat. There would not have been any sleep tonight if he’d stayed. He cradled the mug of tea to his chest, shivering against the heat as he swept his gaze over the room, from the stunning art and tasteful furniture, to the towers of scrolls and tomes.

“You have such a lovely home, San Lang.” A book on the coffee table caught his eye. It was a large, glossy book, brightly illustrated. *Ancient Gods and Ghosts* . It wasn’t an ancient text, but something new. A fashionable coffee table book. Curiosity pricked in the back of his mind.

“It’s not a home. Homes have families and loved ones. This is just a place to sleep. Nothing special, Gege.”

Xie Lian hummed. He hadn’t expected San Lang to be so sentimental. He was so young, so spirited, and yet, such an old soul. Xie Lian furrowed his brow as he set his tea aside and took *Ancient Gods and Ghosts* into his hands.

“Well, it’s a very nice place to sleep, then.” A very expensive place to sleep. So still and sweet smelling. So warm. The din of the rain lulled him. “And so many books! Has San Lang read all of these?”

“I have a lot of time on my hands.”

He opened the book and was immediately met with the image of General Nan Yang, the Martial God of the Southeast. Xie Lian’s mouth fell open as he flipped the pages. General Ming Guang. General Xuan Zhen. A banished god Xie Lian had never heard of, named Yin Yu. The Earth Master, The Wind Master, The Rain Master, a few deceased gods, with details of their passing. The Heavenly Emperor, of course.

“Where did you get this book?” Xie Lian asked.

“Hm? No clue. Probably the bargain bin somewhere.”

Xie Lian’s heart skipped a beat as he flipped to a page with the Flower Crowned Martial God, though there was no artistic portrayal for this one. Ah, of course there wouldn’t be. All of his temples and divine statues were burned to the ground thousands of years ago. No one knew what he looked like anymore, which was just as well. Never mind, never mind. He flipped the page quickly away only to land on the Crimson Rain Sought Flower, Supreme-level Ghost King.

The artist’s rendering of the devastation was exquisite. Hua Cheng’s dark eye stared back at him, the other covered by a black eyepatch. His long black hair was sleek, his features sharp. He appeared to be in his early 20s, though Xie Lian knew he was much older than that. His beauty is otherworldly, hair-raising. The cursed scimitar E-Ming hung at his hip, long and slim, an eye like a red gem holding the depths of infinite sorrow. Xie Lian wondered how true this representation was, but then, Hua Cheng was a known shapeshifter, so probably no one actually knew.

“Does Gege know much about ghosts?” San Lang asked casually, though there was a strange lilt to his voice that hadn’t been there before.

Xie Lian swallowed painfully and closed the book. His heart thrummed, and he suppressed full-body shivers. “Not much, actually.”

“But Gege knows about Hua Cheng.”

Xie Lian looked up in surprise. San Lang was picking at his black nail polish, his face expressionless. A wet breeze rustled a stack of papers on the desk by the window. In the distance, sirens.

“Ah, that. Did San Lang overhear my phone conversation?” Xie Lian rubbed his forehead with his knuckle. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

San Lang leaned forward, fiddling with his earring. He was so pale in the low lamp light. So, so beautiful. Dangerously beautiful. “I didn’t mean to intrude. It’s only that your friend is very loud.”

“Mnm. He is.”

“And Gege seemed quite upset after talking to his shouting friend.”

“It’s fine, really. I'm fine.” He paused. “Does San Lang know anything about Hua Cheng, then?”

“Everyone knows about the Red Ghost King and his feud with the gods. A bunch of noise.”

“Mnm. And what do you know about gods?” he couldn’t help himself from asking.

“This and that. Like I said, I have a lot of time on my hands.”

“Ha. So much time on your hands, with a full-time job and your schooling,” Xie Lian said, and San Lang smirked. “Hmm. Which gods interest you?”

San Lang made a face. “Interest is a strong word, Gege. Most of the gods are fuckass punks, undeserving of their station.”

Xie Lian couldn’t help but choke on a laugh. “What about Nan Yang?”

“General Big Dick? Pass.”

“Qi Ying?”

“Doesn’t he beat up his followers? Brawn over brains, no?”

“Hmmm, what about the Wind Master?”

“If life were a popularity contest.” San Lang leaned on his elbow across Xie Lian’s legs, cocking a single dark brow.

“Heh. The Earth Master?” Xie Lian asked, trying to ignore the intimacy of their position.

“He destroys his enemies by eating them.”

Xie Lian laughed, his eyes watering. He didn’t dare ask San Lang about the Flower Crowned Martial God. He didn’t think he could stomach hearing his dear friend’s vitriol on the Prince of Xianle’s many faults. Or maybe San Lang didn’t know anything about him, obscure as he was. “San Lan knows a great deal about the gods.”

“I know they are unworthy. Especially the Heavenly Emperor. All of the Heavens is a sham.”

“Ah.” By this point, Xie Lian could no longer hide his shivering, and his blood boiled with fever. He reached for his tea with shaking hands, but San Lang beat him to it, pressing the still-warm mug into his hands. So gentle, so gentle. San Lang’s long, slender fingers brushed against his own, and sparks crackled down Xie Lian’s spine.

San Lang was always so gentle with him, so patient and steady, while Xie Lian flickered and faltered.

“Gege is so, so sick.” San Lang frowned. “Won’t you try to eat something? Just a little? This San Lang worries that Gege hardly ever eats.”

Xie Lian’s belly did a funny flutter. He met San Lang’s gaze and was immediately caught. There was something so arresting about San Lang’s eyes. Not just the heterochromia, but there were unseen depths there that reeled him in. Xie Lian could only flounder and gasp.

Xie Lian breathed a slow breath, which devolved into a coughing fit, tears streaming down his face as he tried to catch his breath. “I promise I’ll eat soon. I don’t want to worry San Lang.”

“Is Gege is still pretending not to be upset?”

“Hmm?”

“Your conversation. With your shouting friend.”

“I…” Xie Lian searched for the words. No one ever asked him these types of questions. No one ever listened to anything he had to say. “I did something. A long time ago. Something I’ve not yet atoned for. The longer I go without recompense, the larger the resentment grows. If you think the gods are unworthy, well… Anyway. My past has come back to haunt me, not that I don’t deserve it.”

In his mind's eye, Wu Ming knelt before him, proffering a single white flower. The eyes behind the mask were vibrant. Bright. Filled with equal parts wonder and fury. Oh, how quickly he'd snuffed that wonder out. He deserved every drop of Hua Cheng's disdain. He deserved it all, and more.

"You deserve to be safe and happy, Gege." San Lang's voice was the barest whisper. Filled with something that sounded a little like reverence.

"Ah, San Lang, if only you knew. You'd see me differently. I've done horrible, evil things in my life."

"I see you just fine. We're all guilty of horrible, evil things, Gege. But, I think, there are few who have a heart as pure as yours."

Xie Lian opened his mouth to respond, his throat aching with unshed tears, but no words came. San Lang didn't even know him. If he knew, that soft reverence would disperse in an instant. They fell silent for a while, listening to the white noise of the rain.

"This one apologises, Gege. I didn't mean to unearth bad memories."

"Ah, no, it's all right. Though the memories are painful, it's important to remember them. To learn and grow from them. They are a part of who I am now. I don't ever want to forget."

San Lang opened his mouth to reply, but they were interrupted by a high-pitched buzzing. San Lang's expression darkened. He fished Xie Lian's phone out of his back pocket and handed it over.

Xie Lian glanced at the screen. Feng Xin again. He heaved a sigh and answered.

"Hello?"

“Your Highness, what the fuck? I’ve been waiting over an hour for you to call me back.”

“I know, I know, sorry. Listen, Feng Xin, it’s late. Could I call you tomorrow?”

Feng Xin huffed a sigh. “You probably should get some rest, Your Highness. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine, Feng Xin.”

San Lang took his tea mug and tucked the blankets up around him, his long hair tickling Xie Lian’s cheek. It smelled like lilacs. Xie Lian’s mouth watered, and he held his breath.

“Your Highness, one thing,” Feng Xin continued. “Jun Wu wants to see you. He’s asked me to arrange a meeting.”

The tea mug hit the floor and shattered, lemon ginger tea splashing across the hardwood floors, and Xie Lian jolted in surprise.

“Fuck,” San Lang hissed with a contemptious curl of his lip. He’d shed his insouciance for seething annoyance. “Don’t get up, Gege. You’ll cut your feet.”

“Your Highness? What was that?”

“San Lang, are you okay?” Xie Lian croaked.

“Fine, Gege. I was just clumsy. I’ll clean it up.”

Xie Lian absently watched San Lang as he disappeared into the kitchen, his heart hammering in his throat. He’d never known San Lang to be clumsy. “I…huh? Jun Wu wants to…but

why?”

“I don’t know.” Feng Xin’s voice was gruff. “I assume to discuss Crimson Rain.”

“But why all of a sudden? What’s changed? I mean, it’s been…over a thousand years.”

“I don’t know. Maybe he wants to help. He’s been asking after you a lot these days. I think he’s really worried. Will you drop me a pin so I can find your bookshop?”

Xie Lian didn’t know what that meant. “Uh, okay.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You’re somewhere safe? Who the fuck is San Lang.”

Xie Lian nodded, and only after a moment did he realise that Feng Xin couldn’t see him. “En. I’m safe. San Lang is my coworker.” His own safety was never really the issue. He couldn’t die, afterall. It was only the safety of those around him. His gut twisted with fear and rage. “Goodnight, Feng Xin.”

“Your Highness. Goodnight.”

Xie Lian set the phone on the coffee table and slipped out from under the covers. He began shakily collecting shards of broken ceramic, sweat beading along his brows and collar bones. His belly roiled.

Jun Wu wanted to see him. But why? And why did the very thought of coming face-to-face with the Heavenly Emperor send plumes of dread through his veins? Maybe Jun Wu had some wisdom to impart. Maybe Jun Wu really did want to help.

Maybe Xie Lian was just tired.

“Gege, what are you doing?”

San Lang crouched at his side and offered a bucket for Xie Lian to drop the pieces he’d collected into. He then set the bucket aside and scooped Xie Lian into his arms like a bride.

“San Lang!” Xie Lian yelped as he was tucked back beneath the soft flannel sheets.

“Don’t trouble yourself, Gege. You should be resting.”

San Lang made quick work of the spill and dimmed the lamp to a faint glow. Beyond the windows, the rain had softened to a steady drum. The tip of Xie Lian’s nose was cold, but he was oh-so-warm beneath the blankets.

“Time to sleep, Gege. If you need anything, I’m awake all hours in my studio just down the hall. Just call, and I’ll be right here.”

San Lang sat once more on the edge of the bed and tucked a loose lock of wet strand of hair behind Xie Lian’s ear. After hundreds of years without touch, Xie Lian didn’t know whether to lean into San Lang or jerk back. Equal urges warred in his heart, jousting for supremacy. He wanted to be touched too much, too, too much, and not at all.

Xie Lian’s throat was suddenly tight. “Thank you, San Lang. For All of this. Without you, I’d be sleeping on a cold, flooded floor.”

The light was too dim to see for sure, but Xie Lian thought he saw a flicker of darkness in San Lang’s eyes. “I won’t ever let Gege sleep on a flooded floor. Not ever. He’s too precious.”

Xie Lian scoffed. Once upon a time, such a remark wouldn’t have fazed him at all. He was a pampered little prince with no concept of hardship or the real world. “I don’t know about that, but thank you nonetheless.”

“It’s nothing, Gege. I have to hand in a project first thing in the morning, so if I’m gone when you wake up, I won’t be long.”

“Okay. Nighty night, San Lang.”

“Sweet dreams, Gege.”

Once San Lang had disappeared down the hallway, Xie Lian pulled the blankets up to his chin. His phone buzzed again on the table, and he reached for it. He looked at the message with bleary eyes. It was from Mu Qing.

I need information on this San Lang person you’re with. I hope you know better than to trust just anyone.

Xie Lian shook his head, tucking the phone under his pillow. Still better than the communication array. But only marginally.

It wasn’t long before his exhaustion consumed him, and he was pulled into fever dreaming.

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“Your Highness…” A soft, dark whisper. The tinkling of bells. The beating of butterfly wings.

The rain battered the windows, but Xie Lian was warm. His body floated, and he felt no pain. No need to hide. Everything was how it should be, and he could rest, time thrumming in his bones, wrapping him in an embrace.

The howl of wind.

The drum of rain.

The quiet turn of the earth.

“Gege….”

He opened his eyes. San Lang looked down at him, his mismatched eyes filled with concern.

It took a moment to remember where he was. “Are you—” Xie Lian blinked. His head throbbed, and there was a metallic taste in his mouth. “Are you off to hand in your project?”

A swath of dark hair fell into his eyes. It had a touch of curl to it from the humidity, just a touch. This boy had too much hair for his own good. Was it as silky soft as it looked?

“I’m already back.” He frowned. “I’ll be picking up your shift at the bookshop.”

Xie Lian sat up a bit too quickly, and white flashes momentarily blotted out his vision. His throat no longer hurt, but his body ached and his ears rang. “Ah, no! I can’t ask you to do that! You have so much schoolwork to do. You can’t—”

San Lang covered Xie Lian’s mouth with his large hand. They were so close, Xie Lian could smell him—lilacs and smoke. A shiver went down Xie Lian’s spine and heat swirled low in his belly.

“What can’t? It’s already done. There’s a key to the flat in the orange mug on the kitchen counter. Go back to sleep, Gege. I’ll bring us dinner when I’m off.”

Xie Lian wanted to respond. Really he did. But his eyes were heavy, and the allure of sleep pulled at him, beckoning. The drone of rain against the window was a siren to the abyss, and

his thoughts were hollow in the waking world. Only sleep would give meaning to it all.

He didn't remember falling back to sleep. Dreams swirled, hot and repetitive. He couldn't get comfortable. His body ached, one moment convulsing with shivers, the next sweating with dry heat. In his dreams, he was drawing in a familiar river, but nothing would sate his thirst. When he finally woke, he was disoriented, blinking into the quiet stillness. He glanced at his phone. It was 4 o'clock. San Lang would still be at the shop for another hour and a half. He slipped out of bed.

The kitchen glowed with the hazy-blue of dusk—a gem-toned aura only found on autumn nights. The window was open, and dried leaves of burnt orange and rust littered the wooden kitchen floors, the final vestige of summer's fervour. He poured himself a large glass of water, and chugged it over the sink, droplets leaking down his chin and tracing his cursed shackle. He washed the glass and tipped it into the drying rack.

Pearly limbs of succulents dangled from the top of the fridge. In the corner, a little table, cluttered with stacks of textbooks, stumps of beeswax candles, an inkstone and parchment. San Lang's home, or residence rather, was indeed lovely. Very much like the beautiful mortal boy himself.

Xie Lian tried to smother the fondness blooming in his chest. He was not permitted to feel such things. It was selfish. And dangerous. Ah, why was he still here? He should be going now.

His phone buzzed again from the other room, and Xie sighed a little dramatically. Would Feng Xin really mind so terribly if the phone fell from the window of San Lang's building and was subsequently crushed by a passing car? He'd never received so many calls and texts in such a short period of time, and it was draining him.

It was another text. From Feng Xin this time.

Jun Wu wants to meet. Tomorrow. Send me your location.

Chapter End Notes

When someone asks me to drop a pin, I fucking panic. HOW TO DO THIS? I DON'T KNOW! HALP! *throws phone out San Lang's window*

Thank you so much for reading this, my friends! And for the comments and kudos! They keep me motivated to post! Next chapter will be up on Tuesday! I tell you this so that I must do it. If I don't, feel free to heckle me!

Someone I Dream Of

Chapter Notes

Ha! It isn't midnight yet! No one is allowed to heckle me...well not for this reason anyway.

Thank you, thank you, thank you so much for your WONDERFUL comments and kudos! They fuel the mania, truly!

This is a bit of a transition chapter, but I hope you enjoy! Our favourite generals make an appearance and stir up trouble. Those guys, I tell you! Anyway. I am grateful for you all.

Xie Lian didn’t examine the spark of dread in his belly too closely. Jun Wu had always been the one he’d looked up to—Jun Wu had been a mentor to him, always so understanding and patient. So wise and magnanimous. The Heavenly Emperor once had such high hopes for the Flower Crowned Martial God, but all Xie Lian had done was fail. All Xie Lian had done was let him down. He’d destroyed his own kingdom. He’d incited the fury of a ghost king with his selfishness and foolish pride. It wasn’t Jun Wu’s job to clean up his mess. It was becoming quite clear what Xie Lian needed to do. He wouldn’t be in the capital much longer, so there was no need for a meeting.

Carefully, he typed out a response to Feng Xin.

This lowly one couldn’t possibly impose on the Emperor's time. I will have to decline.

And when that sounded too cold, he added a string of emojis. Ah, the little fox emoji was so cute! He added a few extra for good measure, and a little white ferret, too.

Before a response could come, Xie Lian fiddled with the phone until he managed to turn it off, and tucked it into his little duffle bag. He wasn’t in the right state of mind for Feng Xin’s response, still so tired and listless. He’d started to shiver again in the chill evening air, so, despite his guilt, he crawled back into the hideabed in the cosy living room and dosed on and off until San Lang returned home.

San Lang brought a veritable feast home in paper bags. Wonton soup, steamed mantou, milky boba tea—all things that were soft to swallow. San Lang laid it all out on the table, shoving piles of sketchbooks and candlesticks aside.

“You didn’t need to do all this!” Xie Lian shivered as San Lang draped a woollen blanket around his shoulders and guided him to the table. He hadn’t taken off his boots, and he stood even taller than usual. Xie Lian glanced up at the beautiful mortal boy, his belly fluttering for reasons he couldn’t quite understand.

“But if Gege doesn’t eat something, he’ll never get better, and he’s much too pretty to be stuck in bed all day.”

“San Lang!” Xie Lian’s cheeks burned hot at the teasing. “You are a menace.”

“So I’ve been told. Now. Won’t you indulge me? Pretty please, pretty Gege?” he cooed.

Xie Lian rolled his eyes as they sat opposite each other at the table. In truth, he was a little hungry, which was a good sign that he was on the mend. And once he was healthy again…he would need to make a choice.

To leave the capital and hide himself more thoroughly.

Or to hand himself over to Hua Cheng.

He shivered at the thought, but Xie Lian was more distracted by the ache of loneliness in his heart.

Wu Ming.

It wouldn't be so bad to see his masked ghost again, would it? Even if it was on the end of his scimitar? Or through a cloud of his silver wraith butterflies? Hadn't he longed to see him again?

Wu Ming.

How many times had he thought of the ghost soldier, his last true believer? How many times had he felt the sting of regret. He'd abused something gently offered. Only a monster would do something like that.

If it was possible for Xie Lian to die, he would like to do so by Wu Ming's hand. There was a beautiful symmetry to it—a little bit of poetry. And seeing his ghost again would give him a chance to apologise. Not to try to change his mind. No. He wouldn't try to change Hua Cheng's mind. He was ready for this to be over. He was ready to accept responsibility for what he'd done.

He took a bite of soup. The wontons were the perfect texture, the perfect firmness, and the broth was flavourful and hot. His eyes pricked with the beginning of tears, and he swallowed hard.

"Has Gege thought much more about moving in here for a while?"

"Huh?" Xie Lian looked up in surprise, his mouth still full of wonton.

"I could clear out my studio. Make it yours. It's just full of trash now anyway."

"San Lang…"

The well of longing in his heart rose to the brim. What would it be like to live with San Lang? To cook together and read by lamplight in the evenings. To be safe and warm. To grow roots.

It wasn't possible.

Even if Hua Cheng wasn't coming for him, even if he wasn't putting everyone he knew in danger, San Lang was still a mortal boy. He'd already let himself get too attached.

"I'm not actually sure how much longer I'll be here in the capital, San Lang."

For some reason, Xie Lian didn't think San Lang looked all that surprised. "Oh? Gege is leaving?"

"May I…may I see your art studio, San Lang? Or is it like those private sketchbooks of yours?"

San Lang hummed. He watched Xie Lian for a long moment, one of those wrong smiles on his face, turmoil in his eyes. "Sure, Gege. No problem."

Xie Lian had suspected San Lang was a talented artist. He was always sketching in his books, and the university's fine art programme was particularly competitive. Even San Lang's hands, long and slender, nails painted an edgy black, looked like an artist's hands. But Xie Lian had not been prepared. Nothing could have prepared him.

The studio was small, but with slanted floor-to-ceiling windows, welcoming the soft evening light. Stacks of canvas lined the brick walls, and three easels took up the floor space, each one featuring a devastating work of art.

The first was abstract, the likes of which Xie Lian had never seen before. Staring at it gave him a rush of nostalgia, of melancholy, a strange tightening of his belly. Dark gold and red spirals intertwined across the canvas, leading the eye to the lush swells of a river. The slashes and swirls were simultaneously gentle and violent. How had San Lang achieved such an effect? The emotion on the canvas was palpable.

The second was of the same cultivator that hung in the living room, but in this rendition, the delicate doe-eyed man lay upon a bed of white flower in gentle repose, his slender hand reaching for the full moon; the night sky, replete with fusillades of sparkling stars, was heavy above him, rich in indigo hues and golden dust. The shadow of night obscured his features, but Xie Lian thought it looked a little like himself as he was, once upon a time—the fragile point of his chin, the high cheekbones, the sorrow in his golden gaze—it was familiar.

The third was, again, the cultivator. This time with a sword in hand, his back turned to the viewer. It was only half finished, rough lines of charcoal smudged on the page, but it had begun to take form. Even in this nascent stage, the movement on the canvas was alive. Xie Lian blinked as the cultivator's white robes swished with his attack, his long dark hair flying behind him in silken waves. His waist was tiny, his bones fine, elegant, but he moved with strength and grace, his white-jade skin gleaming in the sunlight.

It was clear the art hanging throughout the flat was all painted by San Lang. They were all his striking and powerful creations, his style daring and poignant. Savage and tender.

Xie Lian suddenly realised his mouth had been hanging open as he stared. "San Lang," he whispered, his tone openly reverent. There was something in the paintings—an arresting and saturated longing. Xie Lian's grief swelled, and his throat ached. "Who is he?"

It wasn't what he'd meant to ask, and perhaps if his head was clearer, he wouldn't have pried quite so invasively.

"Someone I dream of," was San Lang's answer, though Xie Lian couldn't tell if he meant it was a dream in the literal sense…or something more intimate.

Jealousy sparked in his chest, and he swallowed back simmering emotions, too potent to allow. He was out of his depths with this passionate, clever, beautiful mortal. Never before had he felt so uncertain, so overwhelmed. So safe. So cared for. So seen. His body hummed with emotion.

Xie Lian cleared his throat. He swayed a little on his feet, and San Lang, who towered at his side, rested a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“San Lang is very talented.”

“Gege, I want to say something. You don’t have to respond, but I need to say it.”

“Okay, San Lang. I will listen.”

San Lang was quiet for so long, Xie Lian glanced up at him. He was impossibly pale in the light of the gloaming, his lashes so dense and sooty. His red and black eyes were wide. The look on his face was so startling, Xie Lian could only stare.

“Gege is always so selfless and hides his suffering away, so I know he would never want to burden me with his fears and problems. While I didn’t understand your conversation with your shouting friend, it was easy enough to glean that you are in some kind of trouble.”

Xie Lian sighed and dropped his gaze to his feet. He didn’t want to listen. His desire to stay in the capital, to stay working in the bookshop with San Lang, was potent. But however worldly San Lang sounded, however confident and resolute, he was still a mortal boy who would die too easily. And it would be Xie Lian’s fault.

San Lang took a measured breath. “You don’t have to tell me anything. But I’m here. You are not alone.”

The last of the day's light sank beneath the city. A breeze rustled the wet leaves beyond the slanted windows, and Xie Lian breathed deeply of paint thinner, of rain, and the slightly smokier scent of charcoal. Neither of them spoke. There were no words to be said.

They spent the evening sipping tea and reading in the living room, chatting and laughing as though the serious conversation in the art studio hadn’t happened. San Lang teased and flirted and teased, until Xie Lian was red in the face, and when he went to sleep that night, tucked between the sweet-smelling sheets, listening to San Lang flip pages in the novel he was reading, he allowed himself to imagine, just for a moment, that he was home.

The next morning, Xie Lian was feeling mostly himself again, though still a little achy and weak. Perhaps it had been the good food and rest San Lang had supplied him.

He'd risen early to find San Lang sleeping in the armchair across from the hideabed, still in his red hoodie and ripped black jeans. Xie Lian slipped out without waking him.

As he walked through the glistening streets toward the bookshop, the sun rose golden and clear. The sky was a shocking blue, icy and majestic, and the vibrant red maple trees shed their glossy leaves at Xie Lian's feet. It was chilly. The tip of his nose was cold. But it was a lovely morning. So fresh and bright.

As he walked, he begrudgingly turned his phone back on and watched the screen as it lit up with messages. Ah. 23 text messages from Feng Xin and Mu Qing. For the life of him, he couldn't understand why they bothered. Not that he wasn't open to their friendship, it was that they very obviously were not open. And that was fine. They hadn't exactly left things on the best of terms all those years ago, when Xianle was freshly fallen and Xie Lian was freshly disgraced. They hadn't spoken of it, but it was always the dark shadow that hung over every interaction between the three. Always fizzing beneath the surface.

He sighed and shoved his phone in his back pocket without opening any of the messages. He knew what they would say. They were only worried for him, Xie Lian knew, and for that he was grateful. No matter what their history was, Mu Qing and Feng Xin would always look out for him. They hadn't changed much in two millennia.

Xie Lian opened the shop early, lighting the lamps and faerie lights in the back, and tidying up the chaos from the Sunday shift. He sat behind the till to drink an espresso, something San Lang had turned him on to. On mornings they worked together, they often shared these quiet moments, enjoying the caffeine buzz and the glow of morning light, watching dust float in the slanted beams of sun. There was something about being surrounded by the hum of books that relaxed him, even if it was tinged with melancholy. San Lang often sketched behind the counter, making snarky comments about customers while Xie Lian tried to keep a straight face. Today, however, San Lang had morning classes and wouldn't be in until after noon.

Mondays were slow, which was good, because Xie Lian felt slower, still wrapped up in the rhythm of his peaceful stay at San Lang's. He made a second tasse of espresso, even though it made him feel a little jittery, and sipped it cold in between customers. A particularly unruly

customer was complaining about a discounted set of encyclopaedias, when a rap at the shop window startled Xie Lian.

He turned to see two familiar figures standing in the street outside the shop. His heart stuttered and sank. Feng Xin was peering at him through the grimy window, Mu Qing standing just behind him with arms crossed.

Xie Lian returned his attention to the customer, offering a polite smile and a further discount. The customer growled and departed. The shop doors chimed, and his two former retainers were standing before him with furious looks on their faces. Well, Feng Xin looked furious, but also concerned. Mu Qing just looked scornful and indifferent. It had been a few years since he'd seen them last. It was good, if not anxiety inducing, to see them now. Mostly good, yes.

“How did you find me?” Xie Lian locked his anxiety up tight and smiled placidly, even though he knew such a smile would irritate Mu Qing.

“We have our ways,” Mu Qing said. “This was the third bookshop on our list. Lucky us.”

“Ah. Then, why are you here?”

Feng Xin shifted awkwardly, his top knot bobbing. He was dressed in street clothes, a pair of jeans and a black jacket. “We were worried about you, Your Highness. You haven’t responded to any of our messages.”

Mu Qing and Feng Xin were forced to step aside as a customer approached the till. Xie Lian rang the customer through, and once they’d left, the shop was empty.

The skies clouded over, and it began to rain softly. The radiators kicked on, and Xie Lian sighed.

“Your Highness, why haven’t you responded to any of our messages?”

“I meant to, I meant to. Admittedly, technology is not my—”

Mu Qing scoffed. “I knew he would use that excuse.”

“—thing.” Xie Lian bit his lip. He suddenly longed for San Lang’s easy company and straightforward wit. Navigating Feng Xin’s anger and Mu Qing’s sarcasm was tiring.

“What are you even doing working here?” Mu Qing raised a single fine brow, flicking a leaf from the shoulder of his tan coat. He looked so sleek. So fashionable.

“What do you mean? Where should I be working?”

“That’s not what Mu Qing meant,” Feng Xin said. “He means—”

“Don’t presume to know what I meant. He’s a god. He shouldn’t be working in some rundown bookstore.”

“Banished god. And I like it here.” He really shouldn’t have said anything. The dynamic between them was delicate. Every time Xie Lian sees Mu Qing, he’s angrier. More sarcastic. Every time he sees Feng Xin, he swears more, and the dark circles beneath his eyes have deepened.

Mu Qing rolled his eyes. “Oh, yeah? What, do they pay in bus tickets? Are you even eating? Look at you. So skinny.”

Feng Xin turned on Mu Qing. “Shut up. Just shut the fuck up, and leave him alone.”

“How eloquent. The poetry just rolls off your tongue, doesn’t it. Like you’re any better. What did you say on the way over here? That he’s a terrible judge of character, and you don’t trust

this San Lang person as far as you can throw him?”

“Please stop,” Xie Lian said weakly. Ah, but some things never changed. The two generals couldn’t help themselves. He would need to stop them before it came to blows in the middle of the shop.

The shop door opened, and a stream of customers came in. A group of university students and an elderly couple cradling steaming paper cups.

Feng Xin huffed a breath and leaned over the counter. “Your Highness. I wanted to ask you. The mask Hua Cheng was wearing, the crescent-eyed smile. Does it mean something to you?”

A jolt travelled down Xie Lian’s spine, and his belly rolled. He took a shuddering breath. “Yes.”

“Huh? What does it mean?”

“It doesn’t matter, really. But it was a message for me. Ah…I just…” Xie Lian trailed off.

“Your Highness, you need to tell us what it means. Why is he singling you out like this? He hasn’t tracked us at all in over a thousand years, nor has he threatened any other Heavenly Officials. He has set his sights on you and you alone.”

“It’s just that I knew him. Hua Cheng, though he didn’t go by that name back then. He’s from...he's from Xianle. A soldier in the army.”

Both Mu Qing and Feng Xin went pale. Neither spoke a word.

The shop door clanged again, and San Lang walked in, carrying a paper bag under his arm and two coffees.

San Lang wore a leather jacket over his dark red t-shirt, his sleeves pushed up to expose his stunning tattoos. His wild black hair was in his usual high ponytail. His boots clomped on the wood floors. How strange it was, to see San Lang standing there behind Mu Qing and Feng Xin. His past and his present colliding. San Lang was taller even than Feng Xin by a few inches, and in the light of day, sandwiched between two gods, it was even more apparent just how startlingly beautiful he was. Painfully, breathtakingly beautiful.

Relief warmed Xie Lian's bones and relaxed his shoulders. He smiled softly, and San Lang smiled back. At least until he saw Feng Xin and Mu Qing.

Both Mu Qing and Feng Xin scowled, glaring at San Lang with daggers in their eyes.

"Let me guess," Feng Xin said, "San Lang?"

"Let me guess, the shouting friend?"

Xie Lian had never seen such a murderous look in San Lang's red and black eyes. It should have worried him, but instead it only comforted him.

"Excuse me?" Feng Xin seethed.

"You're not excused." San Lang set the bag and the coffees on the counter and tucked a lock of hair behind Xie Lian's ear. "Gege, I brought you some lunch. You didn't have a chance to eat breakfast this morning, and it looks like your friends came empty handed."

Feng Xin's eyes widened. "Why, you little—"

"Aha ha ha ha okay, okay, calm down." Xie Lian shot a reproachful look at San Lang, only to be met with wide-eyed innocence. "San Lang, would you mind watching the till for a few

moments? I just need to…ah…”

San Lang didn’t look pleased, but he nodded. “Whatever Gege needs. We can eat when he’s back.”

Xie Lian led Feng Xin and Mu Qing to the back of the shop, through the moon gate, and into the little office. They stood awkwardly for a moment, looking around as if afraid the dustiness of the shop was catching.

“I don’t have long. We will have to meet after work some time, when—”

“I don’t like that guy,” Mu Qing said. “Your San Lang, if that’s even his real name. There’s something off about him.”

Feng Xin furrowed his brow. “Me neither. He looks at you like you’re something to eat, Your Highness.”

“No, no,” Xie Lian said, his cheeks flushing hot. “I won’t hear anything about San Lang. He is my dear friend. He’s graciously offered to let me live with me.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Mu Qing said. “Just don’t come crying to me when he tries to take a bite of you.”

Feng Xin shuddered, glaring at Mu Qing. “Your Highness, why won’t you meet with Jun Wu?”

Ah, Xie Lian had been waiting for that to come up.

“Yeah,” Mu Qing said, eyeing a particularly grimy shelf with distaste. “He’s been asking about you for years now. He asks that I always keep him updated about where you are and how you’re doing.”

Xie Lian dropped his gaze, a strange feeling of dread simmering in his heart. “I wouldn’t want to waste his time. The Emperor has better things to do than meet with the banished god of misfortune. Anyway, I have a plan.”

“Oh, I’m sure I’m going to love this.” Mu Qing rolled his eyes. “Let me guess, you plan to hand yourself over to Hua Cheng to stop him from killing people?”

Xie Lian’s skin prickled hot and then cold. His mouth fell open, like a clam.

“What the fuck! I was kidding! For Fuck sake, Xie Lian!” Mu Qing hissed.

Feng Xin had gone pale. “No way, Your Highness. I won’t let you. You’re coming with us! And quickly, before Hua Cheng strikes again. If he knew you were in Tonghua, it won't be long before he finds you here.”

Xie Lian collapsed into the soft leather armchair and hung his head in his hands. He suddenly felt fluish again. “I hadn’t decided yet. I had other plans, too. I just…aha…I…I…need time to think.”

“You’ve had 2000 years to think. Feng Xin is right, which I guess happens sometimes. You can’t be trusted. You’re coming with us. Either that or you’ll promise to meet with Jun Wu.”

“Please, Your Highness. Just consider it before you run off and sacrifice yourself. One meeting. Jun Wu might have insight to offer.”

Xie Lian glanced up at this, his body vibrating with anxiety. All he wanted was to sit at the front of the shop with San Lang and eat take out. To laugh and chat mindlessly. To bask in San Lang’s flirtatious teasing.

“Fine.” Xie Lian’s voice was laden with defeat. With weariness. With bone-deep exhaustion. Maybe they were right. Maybe it was the best option.

Both of the generals sighed in relief.

“Okay,” Feng Xin said. “I’ll set it up. Keep your phone on, and don’t do anything stupid.”

“Fine,” Xie Lian repeated. It should have been a relief. But alarm bells rang in the back of his mind.

Long after Feng Xin and Mu Qing were gone, as he ate and chatted with San Lang, he still couldn't ignore his mounting dread.

Flame and Shadow

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely Hualians! Apologies this chapter took so long. The week devolved into pure chaos. But the next chapter will be up on Sunday, or you can heckle me. Actually, you can heckle me anyway. I dig it.

Thank you SO DAMN MUCH for the kudos and comments. I kick my feet and squeal and gush. You are too lovely. Too, too lovely. This humble writer is grateful for you all.

CW: mentions of houselessness. Graphic gore. Take care of yourselves, my dears.

Afternoon fog hung low over the miry streets of the capital, curling and sweeping along the blackened cobblestones. The trees were a burning gold, a stark contrast to the smoky-grey skies. Xie Lian breathed slowly, not wanting to frighten off the frail beauty. In a matter of moments, winter would hold them within its clutches.

The streets were dense with pedestrians, both living and undead. Every passageway, every corner, every close, vibrated with latent, unseen energy—with dust, with memories.

There were more ghosts in the mortal realm than Xie Lian had ever seen, though the hungry ghost festival was long over. A ghost, thin as a reed, towered over the unseeing human crowd, swaying gently in the sharp salt breeze, its glistening white skin stretched thin like a dumpling. Xie Lian pulled his ratty coat tight around himself and kept his eyes down, his heart beating unsteadily—a faint thump from behind a tomb wall.

Ghosts couldn't sense him. His spiritual powers were sealed by the shackle around his neck, any evidence of his divinity hidden away. But Hua Cheng had been tracking him somehow. Something was giving him away, whether it be spies from the ghost realm or some trace he was unknowingly leaving behind, Xie Lian didn't know. Best to keep his head down. Best to stay hidden and not take any chances.

A wet gust of wind whipped his face as he turned onto his street. He knew what he would find before he arrived. An inkling—a twinge at his ankle where the cursed shackled marred his skin. His luck had shifted, he could feel it.

When his building came into view, he could only laugh. Yellow tape crossed over the entry, the windows boarded. A notice hung on the door, and Xie Lian didn't need to read it to know his building had been condemned. Still, he slipped past the yellow tape and took the stairs two at a time to his flat.

He laughed again when he saw the state of things. The roof had completely caved in during the storm, the floor littered with soggy boards and plaster, his mattress buried beneath shattered roofing tiles.

The sword Feng Xin had loaned him was still hidden beneath the mattress, though it had begun to rust, and he silently reprimanded himself for his negligence. Sword maintenance was very important, and he had abandoned his duties!

Xie Lian scanned the rest of the room for anything he'd missed, but he really hadn't had much to begin with. San Lang had managed to grab all his things, even in his haste to get them out of here. Xie Lian tucked the sword away and glanced at his phone.

No messages from Feng Xin or Mu Qing. Only one from San Lang, which was a series of emojis that told a story Xie Lian didn't quite understand. He would have to ask him when he got to the shop. San Lang was endlessly patient with Xie Lian's technological ineptitude.

It had been almost a week since he'd agreed to meet with Jun Wu, but he hadn't heard from either Feng Xin or Mu Qing. A part of him was relieved. The thought of seeing Jun Wu again after so long made him a little dizzy, a little sick. He shook his head. Jun Wu had always been like a father figure to him. And Xie Lian still had so very much to learn from someone as wise as the Heavenly Emperor. Was it pride that held him back? Was it fear of being appraised by someone in a position to judge him—someone who knew his faults so well? What was this potent feeling of dread that had followed him through the week?

Another part of him felt restless. Anxious. He'd been in one place for so long—too long. With each day he stayed, the chances of Hua Cheng finding him increased. But he needed to be patient and wait for Jun Wu. The Emperor would know what to do.

The wind rattled the bones of the skeleton roof, and Xie Lian looked up just in time to see a piece of tile slip free. Ruoye unbound itself in a flurry of white silk and batted it away before it could crack open his skull. The tile shattered on the floor, gouging the rotting hardwood.

“Ah, thank you, Ruoye. So good. Such a good band,” he cooed softly as Ruoye wrapped around his wrist once more. “Shall we go see San Lang?”

Ruoye shivered against his skin, and Xie Lian smiled.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Xie Lian sighed, glancing around his ruined flat one last time. If he didn’t leave now, he’d be late to relieve San Lang from his shift at the bookshop. He would need to hurry to make it in time.

The woman who had been banging on his door all those nights sat leaned against the building, sleeping. Even in sleep, she shivered and mumbled to herself, and Xie Lian’s heart sank. She looked so thin. So pale. How many times had it been him sleeping in an alley, starving and freezing? How many times had he had nowhere to go, no one to turn to? How many times had he imagined his own death, pretended to be dead, just to rest his soul?

He took off his coat and draped it around her shoulders. It wasn’t a very nice coat, but it was better than nothing at all. He pulled a steamed mantou, wrapped in a napkin, from his pocket, and rested it gently in her hands. It wasn’t much. It wasn’t enough. He hoped she would be okay.

By the time he arrived at the shop, it had begun to rain again. San Lang sat idly behind the till, his boots kicked up onto the counter. He chewed on the end of his pencil, glaring down at his sketchbook with unbridled fury. Oh, but why did that affect Xie Lian so? His belly fluttered, and heat rushed to his cheeks as he gazed at the beautiful mortal. San Lang’s inky-black hair was wild, tumbling out of his messy ponytail like raven feathers, and his moon-pale skin looked like satin in the pale afternoon light.

San Lang looked up, his eyes brightening when he saw Xie Lian.

“Gege!”

Xie Lian grinned, and he was certain it was a silly grin. A silly, happy grin that betrayed all the fondness in his heart. “Sorry I’m late, San Lang.”

“Not late. I was just about to make an espresso.” San Lang dropped his feet to the floor, stretching as he threw his sketchbook into his bag behind the till.

“Ah, but doesn’t San Lang need to rush off to class?”

“I’ve decided to skip my first class to spend more time with Gege.”

Warmth bloomed in Xie Lian’s chest, and his cheeks flushed. He’d grown so attached. Too attached, and dread lurked in his heart benbeath the potent joy.

“San Lang! Your schooling is important! You can’t skip classes!”

“Mnm. This naughty, insubordinate disciple will submit himself to whatever punishment Gege sees fit.”

Xie Lian scoffed, slipping his sweatshirt over his head as he headed toward the back. “Naughty indeed.”

In the office, Xie Lian hung his damp sweatshirt on the butterfly hook, shivering as the cool air brushed his skin.

San Lang appeared in the moon gate behind him. He kneeled before the hotplate and began scooping ground espresso beans into the percolator, his hair spilling over his strong

shoulders. In the soft glow of the lamplight, his tattoos gleamed—flowers and butterflies and swords, elegant lines and swirls.

San Lang glanced up, catching Xie Lian staring, and flashed him a grin—all sharp teeth and gleaming heterochromatic eyes. How could anyone's eyelashes be that long? So long and pretty!

Xie Lian dropped his gaze, his cheeks heating and his belly doing a funny little flip that had been happening more and more when he was around San Lang. He tied his long, dampish hair up into a high bun, tucking loose strands behind his ears, pretending he hadn't just been caught staring at the beautiful mortal boy.

"Has Gege thought much more about my offer?"

"Hmn? What offer?"

"To live with me."

Xie Lian took a slow breath. "Mnm."

"Mnm? Gege doesn't plan on going back to his old place, does he?"

"Ah, San Lang. About that…"

"Yes, Gege?"

"It appears…aha…I might not have a choice but to stay with you a while longer." Xie Lian shifted awkwardly. "That's why I was late. My building has been, ah, it's been condemned. My bad luck strikes again! Ha ha ha ha!"

San Lang poured two espressos into chipped white cups. Steam curled up around his long, slender fingers. “Good. I’ll clean the trash out of Gege’s room tonight.”

“Oh, no need, no need. I don’t know how long I’ll be staying, so if it’s okay with you, maybe I can sleep on your couch a few more nights?”

“Gege is welcome to stay for as long as he needs. This San Lang is just happy to see him sleeping and eating well.”

Xie Lian flushed in embarrassment, but his heart twinged. When was the last time anyone had looked out for his well being? He had to admit, it felt nice. Warm. But fragile. Something he would lose. “San Lang is a gracious host.”

“Hmn, but I will have to try harder yet. So Gege wants to stay longer. Maybe forever.”

Xie Lian tidied away a messy pile of inventory accounts and stacked dirty tea cups into the basin. Busy work. Something to do with his hands as he lingered near San Lang. “It isn’t about want. Of course I want to stay with San Lang.”

“Oh? You do?”

San Lang was suddenly behind him and blew a puff of air on the back of Xie Lian’s neck.

“San Lang!” he yelped. A foreign and unexpected heat lanced through his body, goosebumps chasing over his skin. The beautiful mortal boy laughed, handing Xie Lian an espresso. Xie Lian swallowed thickly, squirming under San Lang’s strange and mischievous gaze.

“If Gege wants to stay, he should stay. Where he is safe and sound.”

But it wasn’t about his own safety. If San Lang knew who Xie Lian really was—if he knew what haunted him—he might not offer himself up so willingly. Ah, or maybe he would;

knowing this dazzling, fearless, selfless mortal, he would stand up to Hua Cheng, even if it ensured his death.

Anxiety buzzed in Xie Lian's chest, his blood humming with latent adrenaline. Ruoye squeezed around his wrist in an attempt to comfort him. "San Lang really shouldn't skip class. If you go now, you can still make it."

"I'll only stay a little while longer, Gege. Then I'll go to class. But only if you promise to have dinner with me at home tonight."

Xie Lian glanced up at him helplessly. Strange, unfamiliar emotions swelled in his heart—swelled until it was hard to breathe. His very soul quaked beneath San Lang's steady gaze. He cradled his chipped cup between his cold hands, breathing in the nutty aroma of coffee. After a moment, he gave a curt nod.

The bells chimed at the front, and the sound of laughter carried through the shop. Xie Lian peeked around the corner, scanning for a flash of red and silver, but it was only a group of school girls.

Soon the shop flooded with customers, and Xie Lian was silently thankful San Lang had stayed behind. While San Lang rang customers through at the front counter, Xie Lian replenished stock from the cart, listening to the white noise of the rain and the chatter. He reached to shelve a book, balancing on the tips of his toes.

"Allow me."

Xie Lian turned to see one of their regular customers, a stack of books tucked beneath one muscled arm. He was a young man, perhaps in his early twenties, with curly black hair and bright blue eyes—one of San Lang's many admirers. Whenever he was in the shop, he spoke only to Xie Lian, darting nervous glances at San Lang, too taken with his beauty to even look at him full on. Xie Lian could relate.

The boy smiled as he took the book from Xie Lian's hand and easily tucked it up onto the shelf.

“Thanks,” Xie Lian said with a smile. “Um, can I help you find anything?”

“Nah. I’m just here for the ambience. The books are incidental.”

Xie Lian raised a single brow. “An expensive incidental.”

The boy laughed. His pupils were blown wide as he gazed down at Xie Lian, his cheeks tinged pink. “True. But who needs groceries, anyway. I find books feed me more.”

A single lock of dark hair fell into the boy’s eyes, and he brushed it away. Xie Lian supposed San Lang’s admirer was quite handsome. Would San Lang be interested in a boy like this? Xie Lian tried to imagine San Lang laughing at one of the boy’s jokes, or worse, holding hands with him. His belly burned at the thought.

“Ah. Touche. A hunger for knowledge is a noble trait!” Xie Lian cleared his throat. “Well, if you need anything, come find me.”

“But I have found you,” the boy said. “Which is a feat, considering your hulking shadow is always around.”

“Huh?” Xie Lian’s mind had gone blank.

“I’m Chen Min, by the way. I’ve been coming here for the past six months, trying to get up the courage to ask for your name.”

“Um…I’m”—it took a moment for Xie Lian to recall what his current name was when he was only ever called gege—“Jin Yu. Nice to meet you, Chen Min.”

“So. The beautiful bookshop boy is Jin Yu. Hmn. It suits you, with your pretty golden eyes.” Chen Min grinned, leaning into Xie Lian’s personal space. Xie Lian felt suddenly off kilter, but didn’t want to be rude.

“I…um…”

“Jin Yu, I was wondering, would you like to maybe…sometime if you’re free, go with me to __”

“Okay, Gege. I’m off.” San Lang suddenly appeared behind him and rested his chin on top of Xie Lian’s head. Xie Lian jolted. His entire body tingled at the sudden contact—at the velvety resonance of San Lang’s voice—his cheeks burning hot and butterflies exploding in his belly. “Text me when you’re on the way home, and I’ll cook you dinner.”

Xie Lian opened his mouth to reply. Then closed it. Then opened it again, but no words came. Though Chen Min was tall, San Lang towered over him, and with his tattoos and piercings—with his eyes of flame and shadow—he looked dangerous. Formidable. Completely at odds with his fond and somewhat flirty words.

A viscous grin spread across San Lang’s ethereal face as he turned his gaze on Chen Min. “Those books aren’t for sale.”

“What?” Chen Min’s gaze flickered nervously to Xie Lian. “What do you mean not for sale?”

“Exactly that. Not for sale. You can put them back on your way out. Toodlaloo,” San Lang said, the buckles of his combat boots clinking as he walked off. “See you soon, Gege. This naughty disciple is off to class.”

For a moment, Xie Lian forgot Chen Min was standing there. He could only stare after San Lang, his body humming with elation, his pulse whirring.

“Are these really not for sale?” Chen Min asked.

It took a moment for Xie Lian to come back to the moment. “Oh, um, he was only teasing, ha ha ha ha. I can help ring you in, if you want.”

Chen Min frowned. “Okay.”

“Sorry, what were you saying before?” Xie Lian asked as he led the boy to the till.

“Oh, um, nothing. It’s fine.”

***

The shop filled and emptied, filled and emptied. Xie Lian was run off his feet. He couldn’t understand why the shop was so busy on such a blustery evening, but the air was charged with a frenetic energy. An uneasiness clung to Xie Lian’s ribs, and he stared out the window at the thrashing red trees and splattering rain. He sighed, checking his phone again. No new messages. Shouldn’t he have heard something by now? Mu Qing and Feng Xin had been so adamant he meet with Jun Wu. Xie Lian decided to send a text.

Hi, Feng Xin. This is Xie Lian. I am wondering if perhaps you’ve heard anything from Jun Wu. I hope you are well. Goodbye.

He tucked his phone away and continued staring out the window, a strange restlessness rising and falling with his breath. Something felt off. Something wasn’t right. Maybe he was just tired.

His stomach growled as he rang through customers. Ah, once upon a time, before he met San Lang, he could go weeks without noticing his hunger. Now, he could barely make it through a day without eating before his body reminded him of his own fragile nature. San Lang had spoiled him.

Ah, ah, he didn't want to think about how long it would take him to be okay again—to get used to no longer having San Lang in his life. It would hurt. Maybe more than anything had before. But he would cherish these memories. In his long life, he had lived through many experiences, good and bad—tepid, beautiful, violent, pure. Memories were heat and ice beneath his skin. But as the centuries wore on, he became better at living in the moment, grounding himself in his body. The Xianle war, Wu Ming's dispersal, 100 years in a coffin—the violence, the starvation, the death and death and death—these were the rotten parts of the fruit that couldn't be cut away. But his time with San Lang, no matter how it ached, he would cling to these memories for the rest of his days. They were the sweet fruit.

Finally, the last customer departed, and Xie Lian turned the sign to 'closed'. He snuck a book he'd been devouring into his pocket and pulled his sweater over his head, wishing he still had his rain jacket, but glad it was with someone who needed it more. He turned off the lamps and locked the door.

The streets were quiet—the only sounds were the percussive beat of the rain on tin roofs and the melody of distance sirens.

Xie Lian listened. All around him, the city breathed, ancient and vital. Memories, dust, bones. Life, hope, breath. But the air was thick with dread. Goosebumps pricked up his spine, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

Something felt very wrong, but he couldn't put his finger on what.

He rounded the corner into old town. Above the rooftops, black smoke billowed, rising in a chaotic geyser.

The sirens multiplied, the cacophony piercing the calm. Without thought, Xie Lian picked up his pace.

And he knew what he would find before he arrived.

An inkling—a twinge at his ankle where the cursed shackled marred his skin.

His luck had shifted.

He could feel it.

San Lang's street was a maelstrom of lights and fire and smoke. People screaming. People running. Figures in stretchers covered in blood-soaked white sheets. The flashing of too-bright emergency lights sliced through Xie Lian's vision as he searched the crowd for a familiar face.

"San Lang!" The cry ripped from his throat, lost to the tumult.

San Lang's building—the whole street—was smouldering ash, the ribs of the roofs trembling, ready to collapse. That peaceful oasis, gone forever. Moved to the past.

"San Lang!" His thoughts were coming too quickly. They blurred, tumbling on top of one another, sizzling and popping, as he tried to find the bright spark of his human friend. Beautiful. Clever. Devious. Brilliant. Sweet San Lang.

"San Lang!" he cried again as he ran, pushing through the crowd, hysteria crawling up the knobs of his spine.

Words carried with the breeze, weaving in and out of the wail of sirens and screaming.

"...An explosion…"

"...So many dead…"

"...My wife! MY WIFE! SOMEBODY HELP!"

A scrap of singed paper whipped in the wind, landing in a curl at Xie Lian's feet.

He looked down.

It was one of San Lang's paintings. The cultivator. But now the night sky didn't glitter with stars, but with embers of fire, the edges of the canvas charred, the paint smudged with soot.

Xie Lian couldn't catch his breath.

He was jostled by emergency workers, who were shouting as they carried a bloodied and burned torso from the wreckage, blood bubbling and steaming. No hair. No face. Sheets of skin sloughing off. The air smelled like charred meat and burning metal.

Xie Lian couldn't breathe. He couldn't breathe.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and his heart stuttered. With shaking fingers, he fumbled it, almost dropping it as he tried to answer.

"San Lang!" he shouted into the phone.

"Your Highness!" Feng Xin's voice pierced through the frenzy of his thoughts. "Your Highness! Are you okay? Hua Cheng has attacked the capital!"

"I…"

"Where are you? Tell me where you are! I am on my way to you!"

Xie Lian didn't remember hanging up. He didn't know what he'd said to Feng Xin. Hysteria seized him, and he ran with wild abandon, his eyes blurred with tears. He dialled San Lang's number, straining his ears to hear over the wail of sirens. The call went straight to voicemail. He called again. And again. No answer.

He couldn't breathe.

His gaze caught on an image—a nightmare come to fruition. He focussed his gaze, disbelief and horror crowding his thoughts and pressing in on his lungs.

On the street in front of the burning buildings, surrounded by yellow tape, blood glistened in the dying firelight. Words, written in blood. Large looping characters done in an elegant hand, painted onto the pavement.

Xie Lian gasped for breath, choking on delirious terror.

"Get back!" Public Security Police shouted, holding the screaming crowd at bay.

"My son! My son! My son is in there!" a woman screamed, trying to shove past the police.

Xie Lian's eyes were fixed on the words written in blood.

His heart thudded in his ears.

The words written in blood were for him. A message from his Wu Ming. From Hua Cheng.

The message seared into his mind's eye.

Do you hate?

3000 Blessing Lanterns

Chapter Notes

This chapter was meant to go up last night, but it said the archive would be down? Anyway. No excuses. I deserve to be heckled! I DESERVE IT!

clears throat

The next chapter will be up on Friday! And this week I will finally get to all of your wonderful comments! I am sorry it's taken me so long, but please know that I cherish every single one. As I cherish you, dear reader.

CW: Mu Qing's attitude. Another shameless cliffhanger.

Do you hate?

The words whispered in the back of his mind and vibrated behind his teeth, a reverberation through time. Any lingering doubts had dissipated. Hua Cheng was his ghost soldier. His Wu Ming. His last believer.

Wu Ming was the only soul who would remember Xie Lian in his darkest moments—the only soul who would remember those words. Xie Lian’s own words.

Do you hate?

The blood on the streets ran in rivulets toward the gutters, the rain slashing the pavement in violent waves.

Wu Ming had every right to hate him—to exact revenge upon him. Xie Lian had been cruel. Ruinous. He’d allowed himself to be blinded by hate and despair. Xie Lian was responsible for Wu Ming’s deaths. Both of them. He’d given Wu Wing that heartless name, and then he’d separated the ghost soldier from his beloved forever.

Xie Lian deserved this. And he was willing to accept his fate. Xie Lian deserved this.

But San Lang didn't, just as Wu Ming hadn't.

A whining hum bothered Xie Lian's ears. The wail of sirens, the sizzling of rain-dampened flames, the screaming, all fell away, muffled by the buzzing in his ears.

He dropped to his knees, slowly, almost reverently, his jeans soaking up the oily puddles. He covered his ears and stared up at sparks of ash floating higher and higher into the velvet sky. When his eyes blurred, the glowing embers looked like thousands upon thousands of blessing lanterns carrying toward the heavens.

The humming in his ears crescendoed to a dull roar.

San Lang, oh, San Lang.

Ah, but why had he already given up? Why was he sitting in the street on his knees? He should be looking! He should be searching! San Lang could still be alive! There was still hope! San Lang was larger than life, the brightest light, and so clever and cunning. He might have stayed late at class. He might have gotten out of the building in time. Maybe…he might have…he'd gone…maybe he was looking for Xie Lian at the bookshop. Maybe, ah, maybe he was…maybe he was…

Xie Lian didn't get up. He didn't move. His bones weighed more than his memories, and his heart burst, poisoning his blood. This was no longer terror living in him. It was grief. It was despair. It was resignation. Xie Lian couldn't get up. He couldn't move.

It was over.

Hua Cheng—Wu Ming—had targeted this building, San Lang's building. He'd known. He always knew. It was a never-ending chase—millennia to forever. It wouldn't end until Xie Lian gave himself over.

Xie Lian choked on his panic, sweat trickling down his sides, and he shivered violently. His thoughts were crowded, and he tasted metal on his tongue. He couldn't force himself to believe…to believe…

"San Lang!" he screamed to the night sky, and the stars echoed his call back to him. His face was wet with tears. He hadn't known he could cry anymore.

Something tickled his hand, and he looked down. A silver butterfly walked delicately along his finger, and Xie Lian froze, his heart thrashing against his ribcage.

A butterfly.

Its wings twitched, casting delicate patterns of light along the pale skin of his knuckles. It was phosphorescent, silvery and ethereal. The heavy rain didn't touch it. Xie Lian held his breath. This was Hua Cheng's butterfly, dangerous and vicious. And it had found him. Should he crush it? Ah, ah, but he couldn't! Despite himself, he thought the butterfly was so sweet. So, so pretty. No matter. No matter. There was nothing the butterfly could do that he wouldn't willing accept.

Tears dripped from his chin as the butterfly flew off, and he watched it, his heart cold as a tomb. The long tail of terror threaded through his ribs and tightened. Hua Cheng would come for him now. It was time.

A heavy weight crashed into him, crushing the air from his lung. Strong arms wrapped around him. Xie Lian went slack, allowing himself to be hoisted up.

"Gege!" San Lang's voice shook, his whole body shook, as he held Xie Lian within his embrace.

Xie Lian’s chaotic thoughts couldn’t catch up. He was frozen in San Lang’s arms, his tears dampening the shoulder of San Lang’s sweater. His body hung limp, his feet dangling as San Lang crushed him against his body.

San Lang smelled of smoke and rain and the faint hint of lilacs. He was warm and solid, and his heart thrummed in tandem with Xie Lian’s own. Safe. Familiar. So precious.

Xie Lian gasped for breath—shaky, shaky, uneven. His thoughts whirred and stuttered, then released in a wave of euphoria and relief. San Lang. San Lang. Was he really safe? He squirmed in San Lang’s arms, needing to see his face, needing assurance…ah, so much need when this was all his own fault.

San Lang set him back on his feet, but didn’t release him. He held Xie Lian’s shoulders so tightly, it was almost painful. His pupils were blown wide, his crimson eye practically glowing, and he was paler than usual, which was really saying something. San Lang was always ghostly pale.

“Gege, I was so worried! I’ve been searching everywhere for you! Are you hurt?” San Lang was hysterical, barely blinking as his gaze scoured Xie Lian from head to toe, searching for injury.

Xie Lian opened his mouth to reply, but no words came. His teeth chattered, and he shook violently. San Lang was alive. He was…he was safe. A sob caught in his throat and he touched the tips of his fingers to San Lang's pale cheek.

With a jolt, he remembered the butterfly. Bile rose in his throat. His skin prickled cold, and he grabbed San Lang’s hand. He didn’t try to hide his strength as he turned to run, yanking San Lang behind him.

“We have to go!” he shouted over the howling sirens, elbowing his way through the crowd. He kept San Lang’s hand in a death grip, unwilling to lose track of him for even the barest moment. A desperate mania overcame him as they ran, and his vision narrowed.

San Lang kept close behind, his long legs allowing him to keep pace, despite Xie Lian's speed. Xie Lian had always been fast. He'd needed to be. How many times had he been chased out of town or run for his life, pursued by demons, or ghosts, or pitchfork-wielding villagers? How many times had he run from Hua Cheng?

Xie Lian hadn't realised where he'd been running until they arrived in front of the bookshop. With shaking fingers, he unlocked the door with one hand, still refusing to let go of San Lang. He closed the door quickly behind them and locked it.

It was dark in the shop, but Xie Lian didn't dare turn on the lights. It was quiet, but for the clank of the radiators and the drone of rain on the roof. Shimmering wet trees swayed beneath the street lamps, casting dappled shadows on the shop's hardwood floors—a ghostly dance. Xie Lian strained his ears, listening. Watching for a flash of silver. He shivered faintly.

"Gege," San Lang whispered. His voice sounded strange, far away. "You haven't answered me. Are you hurt?"

Xie Lian shuddered. His hair had tumbled out of its bun, and it dripped a rhythm at his feet. His heart was still thrashing like it's trying to escape. Would Hua Cheng find them here?

"Ah, this one is completely fine. I wasn't there when it happened. It was you I was worried about."

"Gege…"

Xie Lian's phone rang again, and he nearly jumped out of his skin. "Ah!"

Mu Qing.

"Where in the hell are you?" Mu Qing shouted before Xie Lian could say a word.

A look of fury crossed San Lang’s face in the dark.

“Mu Qing, please. Please…” Xie Lian rubbed his forehead with his knuckle. “I’m safe. I wasn’t anywhere near the explosion.”

“But that’s where you’ve been living, right? With that freaky San Lang person?” he sneered, and Xie Lian could vividly imagine the scorn in Mu Qing's eyes.

“Ah, but how did you know that?”

“We followed you, okay? What were we supposed to do when you won’t give us any answers? It’s highly suspect, you know? Your behaviour. It’s like you want Hua Cheng to find you. I don’t trust you.”

Xie Lian didn’t say anything. He was usually able to protect himself from Mu Qing’s ire, but tonight he was exhausted. Emotionally raw. He grit his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. Slow breath in. Slow breath out.

He just…

He needed…

“Xie Lian!" Mu Qing snapped.

Xie Lian blinked. “Mnm, sorry. Um, have you heard…from…um”—he turned away from San Lang—“Jun Wu?”

Mu Qing was surprisingly silent for a moment. “No. We gave him all the information—where you are, where you’ve been living. But he descended to the mortal realm and hasn’t been back. I’m sure we’ll hear something soon, so don't do anything stupid.”

But he no longer had time to wait. The worst had nearly happened. Xie Lian could appreciate the time moved differently for the Heavenly Emperor. Certainly, certainly. But waiting was no longer an option. Not when San Lang's life was at stake.

"Earth to Xie Lian!"

Ah. His thoughts had gotten away from him again. "This one thanks you for your concern, Mu Qing. I'll be in contact soon. I have to go."

"Wait! Where are you? Xie Lian! What the fu—"

Xie Lian's heart sank into the abyss, and he ended the call with a heavy sigh. "I fear I've put you in terrible danger, San Lang. This is all my fault. And now—and now you have no home—" His voice cracked.

"Gege," San Lang breathed, and without another word, pulled Xie Lian into his arms.

Xie Lian didn't fall apart, though his seams slit, and an agonising sob swelled in his chest, he didn't let it out. He didn't fall apart. But he allowed the beautiful mortal boy to hold him in his arms and draw slow circles on his back.

"You're in danger. San Lang, I—just let me think of what to do. This was the only place I could think of to come, but it isn't safe here either." Leaving San Lang is no longer an option. Even if he retreated now—even if he left the capital—Hua Cheng knew about San Lang. Xie Lian needed to think of what to do. He needed to think! He could leave San Lang with Mu Qing and Feng Xin until he'd had a chance to hand himself over. Would Hua Cheng accept a deal? If he agreed to give himself up, would Hua Cheng vow not to hurt anyone else?

"This wasn't Gege's fault. None of this was his fault." San Lang's warm breath tickled the top of Xie Lian's head. The moment was a soft, fragile thing—a breath held. A breath released.

“Ah, but it is, San Lang. This isn’t the first time it’s happened. You were meant to die in that explosion.”

“En. But I didn’t.”

Confused by San Lang’s tone, Xie Lian pulled away. “San Lang?”

“Forgive this one, Gege, but I may have put a thing or two together.”

Xie Lian waited for San Lang to continue, unease curling at the base of his spine, like a feathered snake.

San Lang’s dark brow furrowed. The red of his right eye caught the streetlight. It was eerily beautiful. The most beautiful eye colour Xie Lian had ever seen in his too-long life. “I believe Gege is running from the Crimson Rain Sought Flower, Hua Cheng. I believe that Gege’s name is not Jin yu, but Xie Lian. I also believe that Gege might not, in fact, be human, but rather, a god. His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Xianle, also known as the Flower Crowned Martial God.”

Darkness moved from the back of Xie Lian’s head to his eyes. Oh. Oh. San Lang knew. He swallowed, swaying on his feet, and San Lang steadied him. “Ah, but why would San Lang think such a thing? How do you even know who the—who the Flower Crowned Martial God is?”

San Lang’s gaze darkened, but he gave Xie Lian’s shoulder a squeeze. “I dabble. I have a lot of time on my hand, remember? On top of that, I’ve seen Gege do amazing things when he thought no one was looking. And your angry shouting friends are so loud, with no concept of caution. They’re both a liability. Honestly, Gege, they are likely to blame for exposing Gege’s location.” He paused. "I may have also caught a glimpse of Gege's cursed shackle. The one around his neck."

“San Lang—”

“But what I want to know is, why is Hua Cheng trying to hurt Gege? Why would a ghost king do all this?”

Xie Lian sighed, his heart thudding in his ears. San Lang knew. He knew. Was there any point in denying it? Perhaps it was best to arm him with information since he, too, had been implicated.

“It’s…ah…it’s”—memories of Wu Ming’s smiling mask, his tall, lithe form on bended knee, long, pale fingers presenting a single white flower, flooded Xie Lian’s mind, and his heart shattered—“complicated. But San Lang shouldn’t worry. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Good. His voice was calm. Calm and confident, while inside, Xie Lian was a maelstrom of panic and despair. Desperation plucked at his nerves. How would he find Hua Cheng before Hua Cheng found him first?

“Ah, San Lang, but you’re all wet! Let’s get you warmed, shall we?”

They made a steaming pot of tea in the office—a departure from their usual espresso, but Xie Lian didn’t need anything that would make him jitterier than he already was. They didn’t turn on the lights, only lighting a few candles and lanterns, and for a moment, Xie Lian could imagine it was a thousand years ago, and he was taking refuge in a temple as he travelled the land.

They’d shed their jackets and sweaters and socks, but by some unspoken agreement, they left their wet pants and shirts on, wrapping themselves in blankets instead.

San Lang handed him a mug of steaming tea and sat on the floor opposite Xie Lian in front of the kitschy electric heater that smelled of burnt dust. Xie Lian breathed deeply of the tea. Jasmine. His favourite. It reminded him of the lost world of his childhood. He shivered as he took a sip and glanced up at San Lang.

“I’m sorry,” Xie Lian whispered.

San Lang met his gaze, a look of fury flashing across his mismatched eyes. “Why would you be sorry?”

“You’ve lost your home because of my foolishness. This is all my fault.”

San Lang sat cross legged, resting his elbows on his knees as he cradled his tea. “Gege, that wasn’t a home. This, here, now, with you—this is the closest I’ve ever come to having a home. I don’t care about that pile of bricks for even a moment as long as Gege is safe and warm.”

Xie Lian took a shuddering breath. “San Lang, I swear, I will protect you. I will keep you safe.”

“Mnm. And who will keep Gege safe? Who will protect Gege?”

“I don’t need anyone to protect me. I’ve been alone for a very long time, San Lang. I’ve only ever had myself to rely on.”

That didn’t seem to comfort San Lang at all. He frowned, leaning forward. Goosebumps chased over Xie Lian’s body as San Lang tucked a wet lock of hair behind his ear. “Gege isn’t alone. Not anymore.”

Their eyes met, and Xie Lian’s heart stuttered. He could smell San Lang’s sweet breath, the floral scent of his shampoo—he could feel the heat of San Lang’s body. And he wanted. Oh, how he wanted. He wanted and wanted until he didn’t even know where his wanting began and his loneliness ended. This was dangerous. Too dangerous. San Lang was a mortal under his protection. He dropped his gaze.

“Dont…don’t say things like that to me,” he whispered. The rush of grief was overwhelming, and his throat closed before he could say anything more.

“Why’s that, Gege? Because you think I’ll leave you? I won’t.”

“You will. Whether you mean to or not.” Xie Lian closed his eyes and tried not to feel anything. Tried not to think of San Lang’s intense gaze or the way his raven-feather hair tumbled around his shoulders. He tried not to think of the sharp wit and teasing sarcasm. The fond smiles. He tried not to think of the way he forgot the past when San Lang was around. “I’m a god, San Lang. A banished god. It’s best I don’t get too close to anyone. Mine is a solitary existence by design.”

“By whose design?”

A flicker of memory, millennia past. The bright look in Jun Wu’s eyes as he placed the cursed shackle around his neck. Thinking back on it now, it almost looked like excitement. In that moment, he’d felt only shame. Only horror at what he’d done.

“I suppose my own,” Xie Lian said. He sipped his tea, scalding his tongue. The candlelight flickered. “I’ve made mistakes, San Lang.”

“How long have you been running from Hua Cheng?” San Lang’s voice was cold. Xie Lian shivered. He didn’t dare meet the boy’s gaze, too afraid of what truths he would find there. San Lang saw too much. Far too much.

“Ah, a while. A very long while, San Lang, ha ha ha ha!” He took a shuddering breath. “I did something, a long time ago. I…I almost hurt a lot of innocent people. In the end, I ended up destroying…ah…well. I deserve Hua Cheng’s wrath. And I plan to make amends before anyone else can be hurt, so no need to worry, no need to worry.”

San Lang was silent for a long moment. Xie Lian could still feel the heat of his body. Could hear the gentle thrum of his heartbeat. Xie Lian was shaking again, his teeth rattling as he tried to breathe through this panic. It was ridiculous. San Lang was the one who’d just lost his home—who’d just learned the truth about a ghost king trying to kill him.

“How could I not worry when Gege carries the world on his shoulders? When Gege feels he is all alone.”

“Ah, but it’s San Lang I’m worried about. San Lang has been nothing but good to this lowly one, and this is how I repay him? By putting him in mortal danger? What have I learned in these past 2000 years, hnm?”

“You did warn me, Gege. I didn’t listen.”

Xie Lian laughed, a rasping, gutted sound. “The warning I gave was a little out of context, I’m afraid. I should have put distance between us. I never should have agreed to come to your home. But I was selfish because I felt…I feel—” He only just stopped himself from uttering the words.

“What do you feel, Gege?”

Xie Lian swallowed and closed his eyes. He had made such a mess of things. Such a mess. His heart was a house fire, plumes of smoke in his lungs, sticking like tar to the tines of his ribs.

Gentle fingers ghosted along his jaw, lifting his chin. Xie Lian opened his eyes.

San Lang watched him, and the ferocity of his gaze took Xie Lian’s breath away. He took a moment to just stare—stare at the delicate point of San Lang’s chin, at his high cheekbones, and wide mismatched eyes. His lashes were so thick, so long, so pretty, speared with raindrops. His skin was moon-bright and so pale, a stark contrast to the inky-blackness of his thick, lush hair. In the flickering candlelight, San Lang’s silver butterfly earrings sparkled.

“Gege. It’s been long enough. 2000 years is long enough,” San Lang said, and his gentle tone didn’t match the cold fury in his eyes. “I want to make Hua Cheng suffer for all the suffering he’s caused you.”

“No!” Xie Lian’s eyes widened at his own unexpected outburst. He sighed. “I mean, Hua Cheng has suffered, too. At this one’s hand. He is justified in his actions.”

“But he isn’t. Nothing could justify his actions against such a peaceful, precious, noble god. The only god.”

“Please, San Lang…please…”

“Please what, Gege?” San Lang’s voice was so soft, so intimate. The pad of his thumb stroked along Xie Lian’s cheekbone, and Xie Lian shivered, leaning into the delicate touch. San Lang’s breath fanned across his lips. They were so close. Closer than Xie Lian had ever been to another. “Gege is so beautiful,” San Lang whispered.

Touch.

So warm.

Too close.

Xie Lian pulled away with a jolt.

“It’s best we try to get some rest.”

San Lang looked like he wanted to protest, but he nodded. He rose to his feet, stretching his long, lithe limbs, and pulled the cushions off the chairs.

They set up a makeshift bed in front of the fire. Xie Lian gulped down the last of his now-cold tea and curled up in front of the heater. San Lang lay next to him, pulling the old blanket up over them both.

They pressed close—for warmth, Xie Lian told himself. Neither spoke. Soon, the rain stopped, and the only sound was the clanking of radiators and the soft puffs of San Lang’s breath against his cheek.

Xie Lian watched the shadows. And listened. Ruoye twitched at his wrist.

It must have been close to dawn when the creaking of footsteps within the shop startled him from his thoughts, and his blood ran cold.

In Its Own Tumultuous Way

Chapter Summary

Thank you, thank you. From the bottom of my heart. Thank you for your wonderful comments and kudos. I treasure them all!

This chapter feels like a disaster to me. I may just be excited to get to the next one, which will be posted sometime next week. I mean, this one COULD have had a little more pining and tension. Next time, next time. You'll see.

CW: Brief mentions of torture and violence. Really bad jokes.

A restless shadow.

It shivered around the edges, moving like smoke, as it crept along the stacks of books toward them. The shadow was humming softly, a distant, mournful sound, like a wind through a narrow tunnel. Ah, but when Xie Lian listened carefully, he caught fragments of melody, haunting and lyrical. Ancient.

Ruoye shot out, lashing at the shadow like a silk snake, stirring dust in its wake. While Xie Lian didn’t feel any killing intent coming off the smoke, he found himself crouched in a martial attack stance, poised to strike, San Lang shielded behind him. Muscle memory took over. It had been over a hundred years since Xie Lian had trained in any capacity, but he found his body still knew what to do.

But the way the smoke moved summoned memories Xie Lian didn’t care to think about.

Nearly a millennium ago, Xie Lian had been captured by a smoke demon and held in a bog for a decade. He remembered little from that time, only that the smoke demon had been vicious and unrelenting, keeping him sedated to the point he hardly knew his own name. It experimented with his capacity to die and come back to life, finding endless ways to torture, maim, and kill him. How long did it take for his head to grow back? How long could he stay dead and still be revived? Would fire do the trick?

Ah, maybe it had been in the bog longer than a decade, but there was little point in fixating. Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure how he'd escaped. He'd awoken in a field one night, staring up at the starry sky, his hands dusted in black soot. His belly had roiled at the wrongness of the moment.

Xie Lian glanced at his hands now, sweat trickling down his sides, and a shudder wrung him out. His hands were pale, his long, slender fingers shaking. No black soot. He allowed the memories to diffuse, like a drop of blood in a deep well of awareness. Too many events of his life were down there, unseen. Nothing would wash them away, but they could stay in the cold dark forever.

"Gege!" San Lang grasped Xie Lian around the waist and yanked him back with entirely too much strength for a mortal, even one of his height.

Xie Lian, without turning around, forcefully pressed the mortal boy against the wall behind him and held him there, shielding him with his body. For a moment, Xie Lian's vision blurred with images of San Lang held captive in a bog, a smoke demon watching as he mumbled nonsense to himself—watching the life leave his beautiful heterochromatic eyes.

"Quiet!" Xie Lian hissed. "Don't panic, San Lang. I've got you."

San Lang shivered from behind him, and Xie Lian pressed in closer.

Ruoye was ferocious, writhing and slashing. It pulled books from the shelf, slinging them at the cloud of smoke, until the cloud began to solidify, taking form.

A human form. It was something the smoke demon had never done.

Before them stood a strange looking man—beautiful in an unconventional way, just on the gaunt side of skinny. Not much taller than Xie Lian, and perhaps not much older (looking), with a tangle of mousy brown hair and thick bushy brows. His face was long and narrow, his mouth pursed, and his brilliant blue eyes too-large.

“Room and board comes out of your paychecks, you two.” He cast an inquisitive glance at Ruoye, who was bobbing its head threateningly. “Or should I say, you three? What an incredible little demon you have here. Useful for shelving books, I imagine.”

“Ah, Gorgo,” Xie Lian said with a relieved smile. He’d long suspected the mysterious bookshop owner was a ghost. Now it had been confirmed. “Apologies, apologies. We, ah, we weren’t expecting you.”

Gorgo dusted his long bony fingers on his tweed pants and shot Xie Lian a strange look. “Your Royal Highness. I suppose I should be honoured to host such an esteemed guest.”

Xie Lian’s mouth fell open, and ice slithered down the knobs of his spine. Ruoye fluttered back to him with a whip and a slither, coiling around his wrist. “Ah—” Xie Lian swallowed thickly, his eyes darting to San Lang. “You knew who I was?”

“Of course. How could I forget a face like yours, even if it has been a few years since the fall of Xianle.”

A few years?

Gorgo continued humming the same mournful tune as he shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the hook in the office. He paused. “Dianxia, ask your San Lang to make us some tea, hmn?”

San Lang scowled but obliged, setting the kettle on the hotplate and glaring at Gorgo with a look that gave Xie Lian a thrill. What kind of thrill, ah, he didn’t want to look at that too closely. Best not to think about it at all. Best not to think. Best not to feel.

Gorgo and Xie Lian sat in the sparsely furnished office, sipping their tea while San Lang paced. Dawn bloomed, chrome bright. The shop was due to open in half an hour.

“So you’re both without a place to live now, am I to assume? That was quite an explosion. I felt it all the way from the Ghost Realm.” Gorgo sipped his tea, his pinky finger pointed.

Xie Lian was having an incredibly difficult time reading the strange ghost. He hadn’t given Gorgo’s oddities much thought in the past, but now, he was a little anxious to know how much the ghost knew and what he intended to do with his information.

“I’ll find a new place for Dianxia and me to live,” San Lang said, his tea cooling on the table.

Gorgo’s blue eyes were sharp as he watched San Lang pace. There was something beneath his gaze—an uncertain energy.

“How will ye do that when Hua Cheng is following so closely behind?” Gorgo addressed Xie Lian, as if San Lang wasn’t there at all. He slurped his tea comically slowly. Was he trying to be funny? “What a pickle you’re in, Taiza Dianxia. And now you have this mortal boy to consider. Hmnm, hmn. You can’t just leave him behind, right? Hua Cheng would devour him.”

San Lang’s glare sharpened, and Xie Lian’s heart sank.

“Gege doesn’t need to worry about me.”

Gorgo raised a bushy brow. “Taiza Dianxia. Hua Cheng destroyed your San Lang’s home just now. I can say with certainty that he was meant to be within. Strange. Hua Cheng doesn’t usually make mistakes like that.”

“Gorgo seems to know quite a lot about Hua Cheng,” Xie Lian said. He stared down into his tea, his stomach in knots. He couldn’t think…he couldn’t think of San Lang’s death. He couldn’t.

“I’m a ghost, Your Highness. The Ghost Realm has been consumed with talk of Blood Rain Seeks Flower for 2000 years. They speak of little else. Though, I must say, I do not understand his obsession with Your Highness. It doesn't fit what I know of him. Despite his voracious appetite for violence, it just doesn’t fit. Those 33 gods, maybe. But not you.”

“Ah, well. I understand the reason, no need to worry.”

San Lang flashed him a strange look.

“You know the reason Hua Cheng is stalking you?” Gorgo asked, tapping a long yellow fingernail on his teacup.

Xie Lian nodded. “I’m afraid it’s my fault. I’ve wronged him terribly. I’d like to make amends, I just…I need time to think.”

“Hmm hmm.” Gorgo continued to tap his tea cup, humming softly.

“May I ask”—Xie Lian paused—“how you knew who this one was?”

Gorgo continued humming, staring off into the distance. He had a coffee stain on the lapel of his worn white shirt. For a moment, Xie Lian thought he wouldn’t answer. “I recognised His Highness right away. The Prince Who Pleased The Gods. The Prince Who Displeased The Calamities.”

Xie Lian huffed an awkward laugh. “Then…why did you hire me? Weren’t you concerned I might endanger your shop?”

“I lived in Xianle for a time. I watched your rise and fall. I always thought it was unfair that you had been banished. You would have made an excellent king, young man.”

“Ah.” Xie Lian's thoughts spiralled, and his belly roiled. It was always discomfiting to be recognised, but never had he felt so exposed. So stupid. Could they even trust this ghost?

San Lang refilled Xie Lian’s cup with steaming jasmine tea. Xie Lian smiled at him faintly. He was unmoored, his thoughts drifting. He needed to stay focussed. To think, His fingers shook.

“Gege,” San Lang muttered, his back to Gorgo. “Drink up. You’re cold.”

“Unfortunately, I am going to have to let you both go. That is to say, you’re fired. Can’t have such a liability working in my bookshop, now, can I?” Gorgo set his teacup down with a clack. He smiled, revealing perfectly sharp teeth, but his eyes were bright. “No hard feelings.”

Xie Lian gave a tired smile. A headache was beginning to throb behind his eyes. “Of course, of course. No hard feelings.”

“But I’d like to offer you both a job,” Gorgo said, his lips twitching.

“Eh?”

“Mnm.” Gorgo rose to his feet. “In your time of need, a safe haven. But you can’t go looking like that. You’ll have to go in disguise.”

“Go where?” Xie Lian asked, his mind reeling. He glanced at San Lang, who was leaning against the wall, his gaze fixed on Gorgo.

“Never you fear, never you fear. Where else to hide but in plain sight? Collect the things you need from the Human Realm and meet me back in here two sichen. Don’t be late.”

Gorgo disappeared in a haze of smoke, leaving Xie Lian and San Lang alone in the quiet bookshop, where neither of them worked any longer.

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When the department stores opened, Xie Lian and San Lang shopped for clothes. They'd both lost all of their possessions in the fire, and Xie Lian's jeans didn't seem like they would make it through another wash cycle.

The department store was too bright, too shiny, the air heavy with perfume. Xie Lian's head had begun to throb. He selected a few simple long-sleeved henleys in white, some boxer briefs, some socks, and the least expensive jeans he could find, though they were more than he wanted to pay.

He went off to find soap and toothbrushes, and when he returned, San Lang had filled their basket with clothes and shoes until it was spilling over the edges. On top was a pair of hightops, which looked sizes too small to be for San Lang, and an expensive quilted jacket, also much too small to be for San Lang.

Xie Lian narrowed his gaze.

San Lang had the good grace to look guilty. "Gege's shoes and coat should have burned in the fire. He needs these things."

"Ah, San Lang. But do I need a"—he checked the price of the jacket, and his eyes widened—"San Lang!"

But San Lang had already picked up the basket and was making his way toward the tills. Xie Lian chased after him, reaching for the jacket. It was outrageously expensive! Xie Lian didn't need such luxuries, especially as, with his luck, it likely wouldn't last longer than a week. And he hadn't even had a chance to check the price of the shoes. Knowing San Lang, they, too, were ridiculously expensive.

San Lang would hear nothing of it, and emptied the basket onto the counter. The clerk raised both pencilled brows as she looked San Lang up and down.

“This isn’t necessary, San Lang! I don’t have any use for such fine things! We should put them back.”

San Lang smirked, a swath of raven-feather hair falling across his pale brow. “You don’t have use for a warm coat and shoes without holes?”

“I can just buy something cheap. They’ll just get ruined anyway.”

San Lang handed over a shiny black credit card and leaned an elbow on the counter. “So use them until they’re ruined. Then I’ll get you more.”

Xie Lian sighed heavily, knowing he’d already lost. San Lang was incredibly difficult to deal with. “San Lang was just fired from his job because of me. And unhoused. You should save your money for necessities.”

“Spoiling Gege is the only necessity.”

“San Lang, San Lang! So insincere!” Xie Lian swatted at his shoulder, and San Lang laughed.

“Gege will never find anyone more sincere than me.”

They had just enough time to stop at a street vendor to buy two steaming soy milks, you tiao, and sticky rice balls, which they scarfed down with alacrity. Xie Lian wondered vaguely how he could be so hungry at such a time. But somehow, just having San Lang at his side made everything feel lighter. Easier. In his long life, he'd never connected with someone so deeply on an intellectual level. No one had ever made him laugh so hard. No one had ever made him feel so seen and heard. Like Xie Lian mattered.

Ah, another feeling he didn't want to look too closely at. Best not to think. Best not to feel.

When they returned to the bookshop, it was still closed. Customers paused at the door, peering inside, and eventually wandered off.

"Do we trust him?" Xie Lian whispered. "Gorgo, I mean. What if he…what if he's working with Hua Cheng?"

"I thought about that, too, Gege. But if he was, wouldn't he have betrayed you sooner?"

"Mnm. Very true, very true. But we should proceed with caution. Just in case."

"This San Lang will follow Gege's lead. Where does Gege think we might be going?"

Xie Lian waited for a group of shoppers lingering outside the door to leave, then unlocked the door. A strange melancholia wrapped around his heart. This shop had been the closest thing to a home he'd had in…ever. The time he'd spent here with San Lang could be counted amongst the happiest days in his long life. And now it was over.

His time with San Lang was coming to an end. He would ensure the mortal boy was safe, and once he was certain, he would hand himself over to Hua Cheng—to Wu Ming.

It was over.

He swallowed the taste of grief on his tongue.

"The Ghost Realm, I imagine," Xie Lian said, and his belly burned at the thought. The Ghost Realm. Hua Cheng's territory. The thought terrified him, but they had little choice at this point. "Gorgo did say something about hiding in plain sight."

“Gege is so clever. Of course you’re right.”

Xie Lian peeked up at San Lang from beneath his lashes. San Lang was watching him with an intensity that made his heart leap. His heart thrummed and he swallowed heavily.

“Don’t be afraid, San Lang. I will keep you safe.”

Inside the shop was eerily quiet. It seemed wrong that the daylight was filtering through the dust, and beyond the windows, the streets bustled, but there was no laughter within the shop—no sound of pages turning, no murmur of conversation.

“Gege said something earlier I’ve been wondering about,” San Lang said.

“Hmn?” Xie Lian snatched the “Fuck Off, I’m Gardening” mug from the counter and stuffed it in his shopping bag. He knew he wouldn’t be back. The mug was coming with them.

“Gege said that he wanted to make amends. To Hua Cheng. What did he mean by that?”

Xie Lian’s heart sank, and he plastered a serene smile on his face. There was no need for San Lang to know what he planned. There was no need for anyone to know.

“San Lang, I—”

“Your Highness, you had better hurry.” Gorgo stood in the mouth of the moon gate. He watched them carefully as he handed them each a cunning wooden mask, and they followed him into the office. “Do you have everything you need? It may be a while before I can take you back to the Mortal Realm.”

Xie Lian nodded. “We do.”

“You’ll have to wear these in the Ghost Realm,” Gorgo said, and Xie Lian and San Lang exchange a glance. So they were going to the Ghost Realm! “The masks will hide your living qualities—heartbeats, breathing, that lot. The mask will also hide your divine face, Your Highness. You’re much too recognisable. And a little too pretty. A tempting little snack like you wouldn’t last long in Ghost City without a disguise.”

Xie Lian’s cheeks flushed hot, up to the tips of his ears, and he shuffled through the bag of items they’d purchased, pretending to look for something.

Gorgo drew an impressive array on one of the bookshelves, fiery lines snaking in intertwining patterns, so bright and vivid.

“I thought Ghost City couldn’t be accessed by array,” Xie Lian asked curiously.

Gorgo huffed a laugh, and the sound, while not unpleasant, was strangely hollow. “I’m a very old ghost, Your Highness. Very old. I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

“Very impressive indeed!” Xie Lian smiled and glanced up at San Lang, who was glaring at Gorgo.

“Put your masks on, Your Highness.”

Xie Lian looked down at his mask. It was cream coloured, coated in peach sparkles, and glossy with lacquer. The mouth was shaped in an ‘oh’ and long lashes were painted above the eyeholes. What a funny mask!

San Lang’s was no better, though his was red, with silver tears on its cheeks, and surprised eyebrows.

They put their masks on, and Xie Lian could feel the magic take effect. His heartbeat turned inward, and his breaths softened like the beating of the tide. He felt invisible. Hidden. Safe. He liked his mask. He liked it very much.

“Gege’s mask is so cute,” San Lang said, and though Xie Lian could no longer see his face, he knew he was smiling.

“Are you two young ones ready?”

“En,” Xie Lian said, and shamelessly, he grasped San Lang’s hand. The mortal boy sucked in a breath and threaded their fingers together.

They stepped through the opalescent membrane of the array into a mirror version of the bookshop’s office in the mortal realm. The same shop, only flipped! The same intricately carved moongate, the same bookshelves and time-worn typewriter. The same wooden butterfly hooks. Though, within the Ghost Realm, the air was denser, and all sharp edges were softened. Cobwebs hung in the corners, occupied by glowing spiders with terrifyingly long legs.

It was all a little disorienting, as though something was wrong with his eyes. Xie Lian felt a little dizzy.

“This is my shop in Ghost City, though the available literature is of a different selection. Perhaps you’d like to peruse?” Gorgo said joyfully.

Xie Lian and San Lang exchanged another glance. Gorgo hummed to himself, that same haunting tune, as he led them out of the office, through the winding passageways of the bookstore, lit by bright red lanterns, to the front of the shop. The air was redolent of anisole and…burning hair?

The front of the shop was also a mirror image of the shop in the Mortal Realm, though the books certainly were of a ‘different selection’. Books on curses and spells, on demonic cultivation. Knitting with spider silk. Kama Sutra for the Graveyard. Cookbooks featuring recipes for ‘braised leg of mortal’ and ‘fingernail stew’. Xie Lian grinned as he flipped

through a grimoire made entirely of teeth. He peeked up over the pages of the book at San Lang, who was investigating the fiction section.

Beyond the front windows of the bookshop, Ghost City bustled with an energy the Mortal Realm could never touch. Xie Lian had never been to the Ghost Realm, let alone Ghost City, though he'd heard many tales. Despite his terror, despite his fear of being in Hua Cheng's own city, his seat of power, a sparkling excitement fizzed through him.

Gorgo splayed his arms and grinned, another vicious, but not unfriendly, sharp-toothed grin. "This is your new place of employ, should you choose to accept the position. You can stay as long as you like, and no one would even guess it was you working here, Your Highness. The perfect hiding spot. You can go out in the city as long as you wear your masks. Just be certain to stay away from the Gambler's Den and Paradise Manor. Those belong to Hua Chengzhu."

"Certainly, certainly," Xie Lian said, unable to keep the disbelief from his voice. Were they really going to hide here? In Ghost City? Right under Hua Cheng's nose? "Um, does the esteemed Gorgo know of a place that might rent a room for us? If we are to work here, we'll need a place to—"

"Say no more!" Gorgo's grin widened. He opened a rickety door in between the Normal Romance shelf (instead of paranormal?) and the Contemptorary Romance shelf, the hinges groaning, revealing a narrow and crooked staircase leading to another floor. "Et voila. Go on up. It's all yours. Get settled in and come back down for a bowl of human noodles when you're ready. That is, noodles for humans. Not noodles made of humans."

Xie Lian smiled weakly and thanked him.

San Lang took the shopping bag and followed Xie Lian up the stairs. Down a softly moaning hallway, was a small room with twin beds pushed together, and a small dresser. It was clean and didn't smell as strange as the bookshop did. There was a basin of water on the dresser, a stack of clean white towels, and despite the old-world feel of the space, there was a phone charger plugged into the wall.

"Ah." Xie Lian released a soft breath of relief. "This seems fine. Is it fine, San Lang?"

San Lang took off his mask. He was grinning. Wasn't San Lang at all afraid? A mortal in the Ghost Realm? He must be so overwhelmed. "Gege is here. So it's fine."

Xie Lian scoffed, a strange feeling dripping down his spine, like honey. Was he himself afraid? Was this feeling fear? Was it giddiness? Was he overwhelmed? Was it fine?

While San Lang unpacked their clothes into one of the dresser drawers, Xie Lian leaned up against the window sill. The city was a blur of movement, splashes of crimson, and noise. Firecrackers, music, shouting, laughter. Under different circumstances—were he someone else—he'd be mesmerised. The city could only be described as pure chaos. A violent delight. A tempest of entropy. Ah, but beautiful in its own tumultuous way.

So this was Wu Ming's city.

Where was Wu Ming?

Humans Will Be Delighted!

Chapter Notes

Hello beautiful Hualians! This chapter is a little late, but I promise two chapters this coming week. Thank you so much for your support! Whether you're heckling me or saying sweet words that fill my heart with joy, I am grateful for you!

CW: graphic depictions of the coffin.

Xie Lian knew he was dreaming, close to the surface of waking.

Granules of dirt embedded beneath his fingernails, earth compacted down his throat. Pressure built in his ears. Humming. Vibrations through his bones—through the earth surrounding his coffin, shaking loose reams of centipedes and spiders.

Xie Lian turned over in bed. The linens smelled faintly of oud. Somewhere in the distance, music played and laughter carried like chimes through the streets of Ghost City.

Dreaming took him deeper.

The walls of the coffin pressed in on him, invisible but weighty. It had been 100 years since he’d taken a breath, and his lungs were dried husks, collapsed and dusty. His moments of life were fleeting—bright hot pain and suffocation interrupted by dragging hours of sucking death.

And he was alone, alone, alone.

Darkness again, then a spark of consciousness as his heart slipped over a new beat and jerked violently around the dowel.

“Taizi Dianxia.” A whispered rush of wind. Soft and lonely. He knew that voice. That voice…ah…that voice was...

The humming bothered his ears—ached between his teeth—but it was fine. Only seconds remained. He would be dead again in a moment. Xie Lian’s heart shuddered and thrashed. Hot blood flooded beneath his red-lacquered robes, pooling along his clavicle—along the pale pillar of his slender neck. Drops of blood shivered and jumped at his pulse points.

“Dianxia.”

Xie Lian turned his head.

Wu Ming lay beside him in the coffin, his crescent-eyed smile ghostly in the heavy darkness.

“Taizi Dianxia, it is a heavy curse.”

Xie Lian’s eyes fluttered open.

It was dark, but red lanterns from the streets below cast the room in a soft, flickering glow.

San Lang sat in the window, watching the city night life. He sipped from a mug that said “I’m your cool, slutty dad” across the front—the first mug San Lang had thrifted and gifted to Xie Lian. The gift had made Xie Lian laugh. And blush. San Lang must have grabbed it from the shop in the mortal realm on their way out. Between the two of them, they had amassed quite a spectacular collection.

“San Lang?” Xie Lian’s voice was groggy as he sat up in bed.

San Lang met his gaze across the room. His long, raven-feather hair tumbled around his shoulders, a stark contrast against the marble white of his skin.

“Sorry, Gege. Did I wake you?”

Xie Lian shook his head. He climbed out of bed and hopped up onto the window ledge next to San Lang.

San Lang wore a black T-shirt and boxer briefs, and Xie Lian had to force himself not to look at San Lang’s impossibly long legs. Or anything of the adonis’ other….attributes. He really was too beautiful. Maybe…ah...maybe he was also a little sexy. Ah, ah, a lot sexy. Xie Lian could only pray that the shadow of night hid his blush. Even thinking the word *sexy* was foreign and embarrassing.

San Lang took another sip from his mug and passed it to Xie Lian. Tea, but definitely not only tea. Xie Lian took a sip anyway, and San Lang watched him, his pupils blown wide. The liquid burned slightly as it went down, but not unpleasantly.

When he handed the mug back, San Lang made no effort to hide his quest to drink from the same spot Xie Lian’s mouth had just been. Xie Lian’s belly flipped and fluttered, and for a moment, he felt a little dizzy. Sometimes the way San Lang behaved felt a lot like flirting. It could be confusing at times. Very confusing. Especially when he was so…ah…sexy. Xie Lian was out of his depths. He’d never experienced this rush of physical sensation before. Nor this rush of emotion. This…fondness. This…this…

“Could San Lang—” Xie Lian’s voice cracked. “Could San Lang not sleep?”

“Mnm. The rabble of Ghost City don’t seem to sleep either.”

A procession of ghosts swayed down the street setting off fire crackles and howling at the moon. One of them, a ghost so tall and thin, lost an eyeball and chased it down the cobbled gutter, like a demonic bowling ball. Vendors hawked their wares, and crowds of rambunctious ghosts flooded from restaurants and brothels, shouting and laughing. Almost all of them wore masks.

A solitary ghost floated from vendor to vendor. Her head was bent back at an unnatural angle, and from the gaping maw of a mouth, a strange assortment of pale bones grew from her throat, reaching toward the sky—a tiny skull swivelled at the top of the nightmarish tower of bones. It, too, wore a mask.

Good. If most of the population wore masks, he and San Lang wouldn't stand out. The masks Gorgo had given them would keep them hidden.

San Lang watched the streets, a far away expression on his face. What did he make of all this? Xie Lian had seen many strange and terrifying things in his years. Ghost, demons, plagues—nightmarish sights that haunted him still. He was used to being homeless and in danger. Used to horrors and loss. But San Lang was new to all this, even if he had read about it all in a book. He must be terrified, but the mortal boy was so good at hiding his unease—so good at hiding his emotions. Even now, San Lang practised careful remove, his expression unreadable. Xie Lian's heart panged with worry.

"Ah, San Lang, this must all be so much for you. So strange and foreign. And after losing your home…having to hide in the Ghost Realm. And your schooling! All your beautiful art! I'm—" He swallowed heavily against the rising despair.

San Lang's eyes widened. He set the mug down on the sill and took Xie Lian's hand in his, rubbing slow circles in Xie Lian's palm with the pad of his thumb. Comforting Xie Lian when he himself was the one in need of comfort. So selfless and kind behind that cocky, menacing exterior.

"Gege, I'm fine. No need to worry about this one."

"It's true, it's true, San Lang is so resilient. So brave. But, I hope he knows it's okay not to be fine." Xie Lian squeezed San Lang's hand, and San Lang squeezed back. His stomach felt strange, all fluttery and uneasy. San Lang's touch sent a shiver through him. "This one will make sure San Lang is safe. I'm still just…ah…trying to figure out what to do, which actions to take. But I'll think of something!"

"But, Gege, I really am fine. That pile of bricks the ghost king blew up was only that. A pile of bricks. And how can school compare to a life experience such as this?"

“Ah, a life experience.” Xie Lian sighed. This boy really was difficult to deal with. “I fear we may be here a little while, San Lang. I don’t know for how long. I feel as though I’ve trapped you.”

“How can I be trapped when I’m right where I want to be? Anyway, Gege doesn’t have to figure this out all alone. This San Lang will help. He knows a thing or two about Ghost City.”

“How could I forget? San Lang has so much time on his hands, he knows all about ghosts and gods!”

San Lang flashed him a toothy grin, one sharp canine catching on his bottom lip. “En.”

“Together we are an unbeatable pair! A clever mortal boy and a banished god taking on an all-powerful ghost king!” Xie Lian laughed, even though it wasn’t funny. San Lang might die. It wasn’t funny.

San Lang might die.

Hua Cheng would kill him.

He tried not to allow his dismay to show on his face.

“Is Gege tired? It’s still the middle of the night. He should rest.”

“Ah, San Lang,” Xie Lian said, plastering a smile on his face. He poked San Lang’s cheek. “Who is the mortal and who is the god? Hmn?”

San Lang’s eyes sparkled with mischief, but beneath it was a strange look. Something Xie Lian didn’t recognise. “This lowly mortal bows before the one true god.”

Xie Lian rolled his eyes. “What I mean is, San Lang should rest.”

“I would, Gege, but I can’t. Not tired.”

“Mnm. Me neither.”

“Well, then, is Gege hungry? Gorgo’s noodles were nasty!”

Xie Lian laughed again, easier this time. Gorgo’s noodles, while seemingly normal, had a strange taste and odour to them—something he couldn’t quite put his finger on Like…a cat’s breath. They’d dumped them into the garbage as soon as Gorgo’s back had been turned and hadn’t eaten since.

“If we’re going to be living here, we should get some supplies,” Xie Lian said. “Does Ghost City even have a supermarket?”

Their room, while small, was well equipped. There was a mini fridge tucked under a small dining table and small wooden counter, a hotplate and sink, with shelves stacked above. Xie Lian thought the little room was quite lovely, with its tall ceilings and tall rice paper windows. Rice paper doors, rice paper lanterns. It was very old world, with gleaming dark wood and red accents. Charming, really.

San Lang hopped down from the windowsill with the grace of a dancer. Since Xie Lian was still sitting up so high, he was almost at a height with him. What a novelty! Xie Lian couldn’t help but think San Lang would have made a fearsome god. Or a ghost king himself! Yes, San Lang would fit in here well in Ghost City, with his devastating aura and menacing confidence. His imposing height and silver-sharp tongue. His unearthly beauty.

“I’m sure there are many wonders to discover in Ghost City, Gege. Let this San Lang take you out on the town.”

Xie Lian grinned in reply.

They donned their masks and snuck out into the midnight city. In the glow of red lantern light, the city revealed itself: the smell of charred flesh, flowers, garlic, and other less immediately-recognisable smells; the shouting, the music, the laughter; the pressing crowd of strange ghosts—it was sensory overload. Xie Lian took it all in, his restless fear sharpening the excitement of exploring something new. Something exciting.

The dense cityscape was layered, an amalgamation of old world and new. The buildings were…strange. Some tall and narrow, teetering in the slight breeze, some sprawling and ornate, hidden passageways connecting streets on different levels. Xie Lian spotted one such passageway between two buildings, barely shoulder-width wide—steep cobbled steps leading down to the hub of the city. Xie Lian's excitement got the better of him, and he yanked poor San Lang behind him and down the passageway.

"Ah, San Lang! Have you ever seen anything like this? The city is so alive! So…wild!"

San Lang squeezed his fingers softly. "Indeed. Very spirited."

"Mnm. I never thought I'd end up in Ghost City. It truly is a marvel!"

Though the passageway was quaint, all cobbled stone and clinker brick, misshapen window boxes with odd black flowers growing snaking over the sides, the rank air of the enclosed space burned his nostrils like vinegar; he was quite glad to break out onto an even busier and more lively part of the city.

The streets were packed with ghosts, some wearing robes that looked to be from the Ming Dynasty, some in mangled armour, some wearing Adidas track suits, some completely naked. The ghosts seemed more resistant to modern technology, but some wore headphones or shouted into their bluetooth headsets. The atmosphere was festive, but with a dangerous edge. The tang of blood and resentment hung in the air.

The two wandered the streets unnoticed, though the ghosts of the city seemed to unconsciously give San Lang a wider berth. How interesting. Perhaps his aura really was on

par with that of a ghost King. Xie Lian smiled to himself.

“Look, Gege!”

San Lang led him down a lane of noisy vendors selling Ghost City souvenirs: masks, phone cases, magnets, T-shirts, mugs…

San Lang picked up a bright red mug with white writing that said “GHOST CITY BITCH” across the front. Xie Lian barked a laugh as San Lang paid the vendor and pocketed the mug. He took Xie Lian’s hand in his again, as though it was the most natural thing in the world for them to hold hands, and they continued on in search of dinner.

On a street corner, a quartet of strange instruments played a song Xie Lian long forgotten. Nostalgia filled the cavity of his chest, hummed along his bones, saturated with veins. He paused to listen, his fingers still intertwined with San Lang’s.

“Ah, I haven’t heard this song for hundreds of years. It reminds me of…” Of long summer nights, listening to cicadas. Rice fields and shrines. Incense and warm bamboo mats and soft cultivator robes. Quiet conversations. The taste of magic.

“It’s a bop,” San Lang said with a wink, and though his words were light, there was a scratchy weight to them, almost as though he, too, was consumed by a strange nostalgia.

Xie Lian smiled up at him from behind his mask. Could San Lang tell he was smiling? Did he smile back?

They stayed to listen to a few more songs before moving on.

Down a few more winding passageways—Xie Lian hoped they didn’t get lost!—they found a busy restaurant called “Human Delight! (Humans Will Be Delighted!)”, and among the patrons eating within, Xie Lian did spot several humans eating happily from enormous bowls

of noodles, skewers of glistening shrimp, plates of plump dumplings, or succulent platters of roasted meats. Nothing out of the ordinary, and the smell was divine.

“Let’s try here, eh, San Lang?”

San Lang nodded and allowed Xie Lian to lead him inside.

“Sit wherever you like,” said a bored looking ghost at the hostess stand. She didn’t even look at them, just continued to paint her claws bright orange.

They sat under a string of red paper lanterns, with a view of the busy street. The black candle on the table guttered and spat. Everything was so foreign, smelled so foreign, looked so foreign. It was both exciting and overwhelming. Xie Lian felt like he had floated out of his body and was distantly watching the evening unfold. His only grounding comfort was San Lang’s presence. He hoped he could offer the same comfort in return. He would act more confident—more natural! This wasn’t scary at all!

Actually, San Lang had been quiet the past hour. He’d watched Xie Lian intently, his eyes behind the mask following his every move. Xie Lian needed to do a better job of showing him just how okay everything was. Just how safe Xie Lian would keep him. No matter what.

The waiter came, a skeletal ghost with voluminous black wings. “Good evenings, fine sirs, and welcomes to Human Delight!. Would yous care to see the ghost menu or the human menu?”

Xie Lian opened his mouth to request the human menu, but San Lang beat him to it.

“Neither. Bring us platters of whatever you do best that’s fit for humans.” His tone was cold. Almost sinister. But not unfamiliar. Though Xie Lian pitied anyone on the receiving end of that voice, he couldn’t help but feel a slight thrill. San Lang truly was something. “And a bottle of your finest baijiu,” San Lang said, leaning back in his chair as though he was a king.

The waiter visibly blanched. He stared at San Lang for a moment too long before remembering himself. “Yes…yes, right aways, esteemed sir.”

A few minutes later, Xie Lian was staring down at a table groaning beneath the weight of more food than he could hope to eat in a lifetime. The waiter, bowing excessively, set down a crystal bottle and skittered off.

“Would Gege like some?” San Lang held up the bottle of baijiu.

“Ah, I don’t really drink.” Though it had been centuries since he’d followed a cultivation path, he’d kept to his old ways mostly out of habit. And the one time he’d ever been drunk had been…humbling. But what was the point in abstaining completely? The shackles sealed his godhood, and ascending to heaven again would be a nightmare. It was well known Hua Cheng had spies in Heaven. And if he was going to hand himself over to Hua Cheng once he’d been assured of San Lang’s safety, why not live a little? It might all be over soon. “Hmn, but why not, why not. We are celebrating, are we not?”

“What are we celebrating, Gege?” San Lang poured them each a generous portion of the fine liquor.

“Our new jobs, of course!”

San Lang laughed.

They chatted idly as they ate, commenting on what the ghosts were wearing, how well their charmed masks were working, where they might find a grocery store. Perhaps the waiter would know.

San Lang kept adding dumplings and choice pieces of meat to his bowl. Xie Lian bit back a moan around a mouthful of the most delicious soup he'd ever tasted. Had he ever eaten food

this delicious? The spices were unusual—unique flavour combinations–but it was hot and sweet and wonderful.

Xie Lian hadn't noticed he'd finished his entire glass of baijiu until San Lang was pouring him another.

"San Lang!"

"What? Gege said we were celebrating!" San Lang lifted his crimson mask to take another bite of dumpling.

Xie Lian laughed, bright and clear. His blood hummed with warmth and his thoughts were pillowy soft. This was a good feeling. Loose. Easy. All his worries sifted down into the darkness of his mind.

He took a sip of his recently refilled glass. Beyond the foggy windows of the restaurants, through the crowded streets, an imposing building loomed. It gleamed with red wood and gold paint. Ancient and grandiose. Evil seemed to emanate from the very foundation. Though it was difficult to read from this distance, on the pillars on either side of the entrance were a set of couplets. The left said "Money over life". The right said "Gains over shame", and the horizontal top beam read "Ha Ha Ha Ha".

"What is that building there?" Xie Lian asked the waiter as he collected empty plates.

"Whats? That's the Gambler's Dens! That places is a madhouse when Hua Chengzhu's ins." His gaze flitted nervously to San Lang. "If yous is humans, best to leave it be, eh? Best nots to go there, is all. Best nots."

The waiter bowed so low, a series of pops chased down his spine, and then he was gone.

Ah. The infamous Gambler's Den. Now that he knew what the building was, he could hardly look away.

The sky opened, and rain pummelled the busy streets. Icy raindrops clung to the windows, and the red city lights danced in hazy streaks. Ghost City was lovely in the rain. Xie Lian was surprised to feel a lump in his throat, and he blinked back tears.

"Hmm."

"What is it?" San Lang asked.

"Nothing, nothing. I'm just…proud. I'm proud." Xie Lian swallowed a mouthful of liquor, his gaze returning once more to the Gambler's Den. "He built this all from nothing. This incredible city—a safe haven for ghosts. Look how they all thrive here! They can be themselves. Wu Ming truly is remarkable. He was remarkable then. He's remarkable now."

San Lang stiffened, and Xie Lian met his gaze across the table. Even with the mask on, Xie Lian could see his black and red eyes. "Wu Ming…Hua Cheng. The demon who's been chasing you for thousands of years, is remarkable."

"Ah…aha…San Lang, San Lang. I know how it sounds. I do. But Hua Cheng saved me once. He was my last believer, and I…I was so cruel to him. He was dispersed because of me. I was awful. Selfish. You didn't know me back then, but the things I did…I…ah…ha ha ha ha. Aha, I actually care about him quite a lot, quite a lot." Was he truly saying this all out loud? His words were liquid on his tongue, dripping from his mouth without thought. "San Lang never mind, never mind. The ramblings of an old fool. Please ignore this one. You don't need to worry. I won't let anything happen to you. I promise."

San Lang was silent.

The bill came, and San Lang quickly threw down his credit card before Xie Lian could even react. Though he was quite relieved they took human bank cards. That would make things easier.

"I'll…I'll buy our groceries for the month, San Lang. You can't go spending all your money."

“Gege doesn’t need to worry about that. Money isn’t very important. This San Lang will take care of everything.”

"San Lang doesn't have to take care of everything. This old god would like to take care of San Lang, too."

"You do. More than you know."

Xie Lian shook his head, and the world spun. His head spun with it.

It was still raining when they left the restaurant, and the city sparkled like millions of shining rubies.

“We can wait it out, Gege.”

“A walk in the rain is nice.” Xie Lian had to focus very hard on where he put his feet, but the ground kept dipping beneath him. He stumbled, and San Lang caught him, scooping him up into his arms like a doll. “San Lang!”

The ghosts around them laughed and jeered but then suddenly went quiet.

“It was my fault, Gege. I shouldn’t have kept filling your glass. I apologise.”

“No, no, I should have known better.” He giggled, and allowed his body to relax into San Lang’s arms. As they walked through the streets, the gentle rocking soothed his nerves. “San Lang is so strong!”

San Lang breathed a laugh. “Gege is just very light. He should eat more.”

“How could I possibly eat more than I did tonight? I probably won’t be able to eat for a month!”

“Hmn. Now that we are living together, I will see to it that Gege never goes a month without eating.”

Xie Lian’s head lolled against San Lang’s shoulders and he breathed a shuddering breath. “San Lang, such a bossy pants. A very good smelling bossy pants.”

“Oh? And what does your San Lang smell like?”

“Mmmm like flowers. And smoke. And a little like home.” He was saying such shameless things, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. He was so heavy. His limbs full of sand. The rain pelted his cheeks and lashes, pooling along his clavicle—along the pale pillar of his slender neck. Drops of icy rain shivered and jumped at his pulse points.

“Gege smells like flowers, too. And honey. And a little like home.”

Xie Lian's heart stumbled, and a strange heat rushed low in his belly. “Not garlic and ghost qi?” Xie Lian said, his cheeks warm and his belly warmer.

San Lang laughed.

By the time they made it back to the little apartment above the Ghost City branch of the bookstore, they were both soaking wet. San Lang carried Xie Lian up the dark stairwell and unlocked the door to their room.

They took off their masks. San Lang set Xie Lian on the bed, and without a word, began to strip him of his sodden clothes down to his underwear. Normally this would have

embarrassed Xie Lian, but in that moment, he hardly noticed. The wet clothes had to come off. His white-jade skin gleamed in the soft light, his wet hair clinging to his neck.

“I’d run Gege a hot bath, but I fear he wouldn’t stay awake.”

“Hmnnmn,” was Xie Lian’s clever reply.

Xie Lian could barely keep his eyes open. He scrambled sluggishly into bed, and San Lang tucked him beneath the sheets to the soundtrack of ghosts howling at the moon and the gentle plinking of rain against the windows. He then crawled into the twin bed pushed up against Xie Lian’s. They stared at each other for a while in the soft glow of the room.

San Lang's gaze was so soft. When San Lang looked at him like this, he felt seen. He felt treasured. Xie Lian’s resiliency had been compromised, and his heart ached with need. With want. His San Lang. His San Lang. So lovely. So generous and kind. So brave and selfless.

“San Lang,” he breathed.

“Gege.”

They were so close, he could feel the heat coming off of San Lang’s body. Even this small distance between them felt wrong. San Lang was too far away. He craved the closeness he'd felt as San Lang carried him home. Wrapped in those warm strong arms…ah…had he ever felt anything like it? Had he ever felt anything like this? His body felt tight and hot, and he was restless.

Would San Lang taste as sweet as he smelled? The longing to kiss him was a wild beast in his heart. The need, the aching need, was palpable. His heart…his heart…

He wanted to kiss San Lang.

He wanted to kiss San Lang.

The way San Lang was looking at him now rose goosebumps across his chilled skin, and the heat low in his belly turned molten.

His thoughts were sluggish and too-hot. The world was spinning, and San Lang was at the centre of it all. San Lang's breath ghosted across his wetted lips, so sweet, and without meaning to, Xie Lian closed the distance between them. Before their lips could touch, San Lang jerked away in surprise. His eyes were wide, and his long black lashes fluttered. They stared at each other for a moment longer, and the warmth that had consumed Xie Lian’s body turned to ice.

What had he done? What did he think he was doing? What had he done?

“Goodnight, Gege,” San Lang said, and he sounded a million li away. The beautiful mortal boy turned over, pulling the covers up around him.

House Spouse

Chapter Notes

I cannot say enough how much your support means to me. Your comments fill me with such glee, and I read each and every one over and over to sate my starved writerly heart. Thank you, thank you, thank you. You are magical, majestic creatures.

The next chapter should be up Friday. And if not, HECKLE ME I LIKE IT.

Okay, okay. I need more mug ideas. I'm running out. GAH!

And thank you to Koi for listening to my crazed ramblings. I adore you.

Someone was pinching his cheek. Not hard—a soft touch—but hard enough to rouse him from chaotic dreaming.

Xie Lian's body was sluggish and heavy. His mouth gritty and sticky. His body was too tight and too hot, and his belly roiled.

His other cheek was pinched, and a playful laugh pierced the veil of sleep.

"Your Highness, time to wake up." The deep, velvety whisper chased goosebumps over his skin. Gentle fingered tucked his hair behind his ear. "Gege, Gege, we'll miss our first shift in Ghost City."

Xie Lian's eyes fluttered open.

San Lang sat on the edge of his bed, steaming mug of coffee in hand, his lips pulled into a mischievous grin that didn't meet his eyes. "There you are. Welcome back, Gege."

"San Lang?" Xie Lian croaked. The room was spinning, and his mouth tasted acrid.

San Lang's hair was down around his shoulders, and his ears were decked out in more silver jewellery than Xie Lian had ever seen him wear—tiny silver butterflies, silver flowers, a sabre that speared through the shell of his ear—it was quite alluring, but gave him a strange feeling. In the hazy glow of the Ghost City dawn, San Lang's skin was paler than usual. Bone white, casting his elegant, ink-black brow, lashes, widow's peak, into sharp relief. He seemed...different. More.

But superimposed on top of his cocky smirk, was the soft look he'd given Xie Lian last night—just before Xie Lian attempted to kiss him.

Shame writhed in his belly, a pit of coiled snakes.

He'd tried to kiss San Lang. His dear friend, whose life he'd ruined, whose home he'd destroyed. He'd tried to kiss him. He could no longer meet those ruby and onyx eyes. Shame threatened to smother him. Xie Lian was a banished god, and San Lang was a mortal. What had he done?

"Gege, drink this. I'm sure you have a wicked hangover, my flirty little drunk."

Flirty little drunk? Was…what?

Xie Lian's eyes widened in shock, and shame sharpened into an acute pain. He buried his face in the pillow. Was San Lang really teasing him about this? He'd expected they would both pretend nothing happened until the awkwardness consumed the entirety of Ghost City—he had *not* expected San Lang to immediately bring it up. "San Lang!"

"Come on, Gege. It's not so bad. You were very cute," he cooed.

"Cute," Xie Lian said, his voice muffled by the bedding.

“Very cute, with your pretty little mouth all puckered for a smooch.”

Xie Lian’s entire body flashed cold then hot, and his belly squirmed. “Ah, San Lang, please don’t tease. I’m so ashamed.”

“Why does Gege always think that? I loved seeing Gege let loose for a night. You deserve to feel carefree. Especially now. Don't feel ashamed.”

“I didn’t realise…I didn’t…aha…ha ha ha, San Lang, I didn’t mean to drink so much. I don’t ever drink. Now I remember why.”

“It was baijiu, Gege. It’ll sneak up on you.”

“But San Lang was fine!” Xie Lian protested. “I didn’t see San Lang trying to kiss anyone.”

San Lang laughed, but it sounded strange. Strained. “Gege, I’m twice your size. And I've had practice holding my liquor. Come, drink this. It will help revive you.”

Xie Lian huffed and sat up, his head spinning a little. His hair stuck to the back of his neck, still damp from the rain. He took the espresso from San Lang. It was in a mug with Van Gogh’s face on it that said “Gogh Away”. It was a mug he didn’t recognise. San Lang must have picked it up. He’d become a very good scrap collector.

Despite San Lang’s words, Xie Lian still could not meet his gaze. “San Lang, I am sorry.”

“Why would you be sorry?”

“I shouldn’t have…tried to kiss you without permission. I made you uncomfortable.”

San Lang clicked his tongue. “Gege could never make this one uncomfortable. This one just didn’t want Gege to regret anything. To be kissed by Gege is this one’s wildest dream.”

“Ah, San Lang. So insincere.”

Xie Lian’s cheeks burned hot. His thoughtful and kind San Lang was giving him some face. He might as well take it. Though he worried something had shifted between them. A line crossed. At least now Xie Lian knew all of San Lang’s silly flirting was just that: silly flirting. Nothing to be taken seriously. Not that it mattered. His feelings for this mortal boy were getting out of hand. They had been simmering embers, but now they were an all out wild fire, consuming him body and soul. San Lang. San Lang. San Lang. The longing was palpable. It was making him stupid. But he’d never connected with anyone in this way before. He’d never felt so seen. So cared for. Ah…ah…

Xie Lian swallowed back tears. He needed to start distancing himself. Finding a way to ensure San Lang would be safe before he sought out Hua Cheng to hand himself over. He needed to talk to Feng Xin. Not Mu Qing. Mu Qing would see right through his plans. No, not Feng Xin either.

Xie Lian took a sip of coffee, savouring the nutty flavours on his tongue. San Lang pinched his cheek and got up to continue getting ready. When Xie Lian had finished the coffee, he realised that it had, in fact, revived him, and after a shower, he only felt a little queasy and dizzy. Well enough for his first shift in Ghost City.

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San Lang, as it turned out, was more of a menace in the Ghost Realm than he was in the Mortal Realm. He had no fear of the strange array of customers that came into the shop, treating them all with his usual cruel indifference, only with more arrogance than usual. Xie Lian couldn’t help but think he fit in here quite well. Quite well, indeed. He seemed to have a natural understanding of ghost culture, while Xie Lian had already made one or two gaffs, resulting in disgruntled customers. Who knew you weren’t supposed to look a cyclops in the eye! Lesson learned.

Xie Lian was all too happy to let him take the front desk while he familiarised himself with the stock.

The shop was much busier than the one in the Mortal Realm. And much, much more full of strange and unusual books. Xie Lian found himself regularly flustered by the familiar-but-not appearance of the shop. It was the mirror footprint of the shop he was so used to working in. He kept getting turned around.

To his shock and surprise, there was an entire section of the shop dedicated to Hua Cheng. History books, biographies, chronicles of his acquisitions, his successes, his valour. One thing was certain. The Ghost Realm idolised their king. Love him. Held him above all others. He was their saviour.

He plucked a history book from the shelf and flipped through the pages. There was a chapter about all gods he'd destroyed; a chapter on his demonic scimitar; a chapter on the inception of Ghost City; a chapter on his time in Mount Tonglu; a chapter on his butterflies. There was a complete chapter on Hua Cheng's feud with the cowardly Flower Crowned Martial God, who had slighted the Ghost King in some cruel way. Xie Lian was fascinated, a cocktail of grief, fear, and admiration sloshing in his belly along with the dregs of baijiu.

Hua Cheng, as a known shape shifter, was depicted in many forms, but he was most commonly seen in what the population suspected was his true form. He was very tall—taller, even, than San Lang—with long black hair and an eyepatch over his right eye. He had a widow's peak and ears sharp as knives. He was very beautiful—painfully so—dressed in blood-red robes, ornate silver jewellery, and black boots that chimed when he walked. His skin was pale as the moon, and his chin came to a slight point. There was something wild and violent about his beauty—fascinating and unsettling. Xie Lian couldn't stop staring. His face was…somehow familiar. The curve of his jaw, the point of his chin…the sparkle of his one smouldering black eye gave Xie Lian a pain in his heart. In truth, sometimes San Lang reminded him a lot of Hua Cheng. Xie Lian hadn't failed to notice that they both favourited silver butterflies and were similar in appearance. He tried to imagine San Lang enacting vengeance upon him, slaughtering those he loved, and burning buildings to the ground—he tried to imagine San Lang writing "do you hate?" in blood on the sidewalk. His kind and wonderful San Lang who looked after him. Listened to his long-winded ramblings. Made sure he ate well. Who made him forget his painful past. Ah, San Lang would likely burn himself to the ground rather than lay a finger on Xie Lian. And if San Lang was Hua Cheng...Xie Lian would be truly alone. It just wasn't possible.

He stared down at the image of Hua Cheng on the page. Was this the face that had been behind the crescent-eyed smile? Was this the face of his Wu Ming? His heart thudded violently around the horrific and messy combination of feelings. His Wu Ming. The ghost who had saved him. The ghost who wanted to destroy him. Was he afraid? No. After all these

years, he was no longer afraid. Not for himself, anyway. He was ready. Ready to face the past.

"Your Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Xianle." Gorgo appeared from the back, holding a stack of books that whispered in his arms. His curly hair was wild, and…now a cornflower blue—the same shade as his strange eyes. His eyebrows and eyelashes were blue, too. Had he just been in disguise before, and this was his true form. His eyes appeared impossibly larger, and he wore a manic smile that made Xie Lian feel a little off kilter.

"Ah, Gorgo, please, I'm no longer a prince. No need for such formality. I'm your employee now, after all."

Gorgo raised a bushy brow, leaning his slender shoulder against the bookshelf. He appeared frail. "Forgive me, Your Highness. It is still a little bit of a wonder to have you here. I have met many a famous figure in my long life, but none quite so infamous as yourself. It is an honour."

Xie Lian couldn't help but huff a laugh. "Infamous. I suppose that's apt."

"What should I call you then, eh? You'll have to come up with a new alias. Jin Yu has been compromised, and I'm certainly not going to call you gege."

Xie Lian nodded awkwardly, his cheeks heating.

"Hmn." Gorgo tapped his thin lip with a long, bony finger. "How about Xie Qian?"

"Qian?" Xie Lian asked in surprise. "I don't know about—"

"It's perfect." His maniacal grin stretched comically across his face. "I see you have found Hua Cheng's section of the shop. Does it make you a little uncomfortable, I wonder?"

Xie Lian replaced the history book with a heavy swallow. “Ah, ha ha ha honestly, I shouldn’t be surprised to see it here. This is Ghost City, after all.”

“Yes, yes, and the ghosts here really do love their king. Although love isn’t quite the right word. Worship? Fear and revere? Venerate? Anyway. You get the point. He is a god in Ghost City. He ascended to Heaven once, you know?”

“Ah…” Xie Lian’s mouth was dry, and he could taste bitter baijiu on his tongue. “He…he did?”

“Mnm. Jumped right back down. Not interested in godhood.”

Xie Lian was breathless. Wu Ming had ascended? He didn’t know quite what to feel about that. “May I ask, what are Gorgo’s thoughts on the Crimson Rain Sought Flower?”

Gorgo laughed. “He’s a cocky brat. But he takes good care of the city, so I can’t complain. No one dares challenge him, so the ghosts here are safe. They can live as they wish, as long as they don't go against his rules.”

“Ah, does Gorgo know Hua Cheng personally, then?”

“Eh, we are acquainted. Hua Cheng is a great lover of books, and is often looking for something rare or peculiar. He is a worthy opponent for debate, so I don’t mind him. But Your Highness Xie Qian need not worry. He doesn’t frequent the shop. You’ll be safe here.” Gorgo set down the stack of whispering books on a cart.

“My gratitude, Gorgo. I truly don’t know what we would have done without you.”

Gorgo’s strangely beautiful face pulled into a frown. “You are very worried for your friend, I know, Your Highness. But your San Lang can take care of himself. He survived Hua Cheng’s wrath once already, no? Quite the miracle to have escaped unscathed. Like I said, Hua Cheng doesn’t make mistakes like that.”

This was true. San Lang had miraculously escaped. Xie Lian could hardly believe it still, but San Lang hadn’t been touched in the explosion. Certainly his San Lang was very brave. Resilient. He could thrive just about anywhere! Just look how he’d already adapted to Ghost City. It was impressive to say the least. And though San Lang hadn’t said much, Xie Lian had put together that he’d had a troubled childhood, despite his obvious wealth. He was a survivor.

“Gorgo?”

“Hmn?”

Xie Lian bit his bottom lip. “Do humans often live in the Ghost Realm?”

“Eh? Sometimes. At their own peril.” He cackled and rubbed his hands together like a villain. “Kidding. Why do you ask?”

“If I were to…that is to say…if I had to go away, would San Lang be okay here without me? Would he be safe here for a time? Until everything settled and my friends could relocate him?”

Gorgo raised both bushy cornflower-blue eyebrows and crossed his skinny arms. “Your Highness. Think long and hard about your plans. Something strange is happening here. I would go so far as to say that things are not as they seem." "Oh, certainly, certainly." And there was something strange happening here. He still hadn't figured out how Hua Cheng had found him. And something else was bothering him—something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He needed to think. But Gorgo also didn't know how terribly he'd wronged Wu Ming. How selfish and cruel he'd been. For Hua Cheng to seek his retribution made sense. And he was at peace with it. "Anyway, if you ran off, you’d devastate your San Lang.”

Xie Lian swallowed heavily, undesirably emotions rising inside him. Ah, it was fine. Everything was fine. They were safe here—San Lang was safe here. It was fine. The coming events would be unpleasant, but San Lang would be fine eventually.

“San Lang will be better off without the God of Misfortune haunting his steps.” He managed to deliver the line with a rueful smile, but no emotion. He built up his defences and severed the connection between his heart and his mind. Everything was fine. Everything was fine.

Gorgo gave him a hard look, but said nothing.

The shop bells chimed, and a low whine pierced the quiet of the shop. Gorgo rolled his eyes. “I’ll take care of that. But, come. I’ll introduce you to your coworker.”

“Huh? Coworker?” Xie Lian asked nervously.

“Don’t worry. He’s trustworthy. Come along, Your Highness.”

Behind the counter, San Lang was having a glaring contest with a boy Xie Lian had never seen before, ignoring the whining ghost browsing the contemptorary romance section. The unmasked boy appeared to be in his early twenties and was deathly pale, almost grey, with long black hair, and eyes as dark blue as the boundless sea. He wore long black robes, and a pearl necklace at his throat.

Both the boy and San Lang looked up as Gorgo and Xie Lian approached. The boy eyed Xie Lian curiously, the corner of his mouth pulling up into a cruel smirk.

“Eh, I see you’ve met San Lang already. You two play nice. I don’t want to see you whipping your dicks out to see whose is bigger.”

Xie Lian stifled a laugh, and San Lang shot him a betrayed look from behind his crimson mask.

“Your Highness Xie Qian, this is He Xuan. He’s been working here for many years, so if you have any questions and I’m not around, ask him.”

“Your Highness.” He Xuan gave a deep, mocking bow, and San Lang looked as though he was about to slaughter him.

Xie Lian sighed, his shoulders slumping. After the night he’d had, he wasn’t feeling all that resilient, and He Xuan’s obvious disdain made him feel slightly off kilter. “Ah, lovely to meet you, He Xuan. Just Xie Qian is fine. I’m not really a prince.”

“No?” He Xuan said. “I’ll drop the formalities, then.”

“You’ll call him His Highness, or I will gladly make you,” San Lang seethed.

“What did I say about dicks!” Gorgo ran his spidery-long fingers through his wild mane of hair. “This was a bad idea. Fuck.”

Xie Lian laughed awkwardly. “Anyway, I’ll try not to bombard you with questions, He Xuan. Hopefully our transition goes smoothly.”

“Don’t bother asking this fool anything, Gege. I’ve already tried. He’s useless.”

Xie Lian’s anxiety spiked. It was best not to draw any attention to themselves or the bookshop. “Okay, okay, let’s all try to get along.”

“Listen to His Highness, you two,” Gorgo snapped, “or you’ll both be staying late to take inventory while I take His Highness to dinner.” And with that, he vanished in a cloud of blue smoke.

“He always does that,” He Xuan said. “Thinks he’s impressive.”

Xie Lian was glad his mask hid just how impressed he was. Gorgo was a very old ghost indeed.

As the day wore on into evening, there was a lull in the shop. He Xuan suggested Xie Lian go out and find them some dinner, and Xie Lian madly wrote down his order. Would he really eat all of that?

San Lang objected, but Xie Lian was quite keen on the idea of going out on his own. He needed time to think.

“I’ll stock up on some groceries for our room, San Lang. Lots of snacks.”

“But, Gege, doesn’t my beloved house spouse want to do the shopping together?” San Lang whined.

“Pathetic,” He Xuan mumbled.

House spouse. More over-the-top flirting. But now Xie Lian knew it was just silliness. San Lang likely had no idea how deeply it affected him. Which was, of course, for the best. Xie Lian swallowed his painful feelings for the beautiful mortal boy. He ignored the distance growing between them. He ignored the pain in his heart. This was for the best.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine on my own, San Lang.” Xie Lian turned to He Xuan, who was reading a book on vampire squid. “He Xuan, does Ghost City have a market?”

Without looking up from his book, He Xuan said, “Down the street, hang a left. Don’t let the banshees on the corner trick you into helping them find their ‘dear lost babies’. There are no babies. They will eat a sweet little thing like you for dinner.”

“Noted,” Xie Lian said with a shudder.

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Xie Lian managed to avoid the very persistent banshees on the corner and made it to his destination without issue.

The market itself lent the sensation of stepping back in time. Red lanterns bobbed in the autumn breeze, and the lambent light of the gloaming doused the market in thick cakes of cerulean, a strange and vivid contrast to the crimson of the throbbing city. Vendors shouted, and steam rose up into the sky from boiling pots. Ghosts of every ilk shopped for unfamiliar vegetables and meats, for spices and treats.

It was like the markets of old, back in Xian Le. Xie Lian had snuck out a few times with Mu Qing and Feng Xin to browse midnight stalls and gorge on street food. He remembered lying on the warm stones of the Royal Pavilion afterward, eating sticky tanghulu, looking up at the abyss, waiting for godhood. Mu Qing and Feng Xing would bicker, and the air smelled of spices. He'd been so young then. So young. What did it all mean? What was it all for? How long could one person live?

The same smell of spices hung in the air now: sichuan peppercorns, ginger, star anise. Xie Lian breathed deeply of the memories, ignoring the grief that rushed toward him like the tide. He was sweaty beneath his mask, and his stomach was unsettled. He needed some food and a good night's rest.

He chose fruit he knew San Lang liked. Several packets of noodles that one could simply immerse in water to cook. Instant noodles. That's what they were called. He bought chicken and pork and vegetables that looked familiar, though he wasn't certain.

No one seemed to notice him. He wasn't human or god in this strange place. He was invisible. And while that's what he'd longed for, now it felt empty. Loneliness clawed up his throat, and he swallowed mouthful after mouthful of bile.

A wave of dizziness caught him off guard, and he staggered. He leaned against what appeared to be a temple. Did ghosts pray to gods? He wasn't sure. He pulled his phone out from the pocket of the expensive new jeans San Lang had bought him. Ignoring the insane volume of text messages from Mu Qing and Feng Xin, he tapped out a text to Shi Qingxuan.

Wind Master. This is Xie Lian. I'm wondering if you're free to meet in the capital this week? I need help with something.

He waited for a moment for a reply. When none came, he pocketed his phone and continued on with the shopping. By the time he arrived back at the shop, carrying bulging bags of food for He Xuan, he was sweaty, shaky, and utterly exhausted.

“Gege,” San Lang whispered in his ear, and Xie Lian shivered with need. “Go upstairs to bed. I’ll be up soon.”

Normally Xie Lian would argue, but he was dead on his feet.

He nodded gratefully. “Thank you, San Lang. I…I need—”

“It’s okay, Gege. I’ve have you. I’ll always have you.”

Xie Lian showered again and crawled into bed. Beyond his windows, the city came alive, the red glow of night rushing into the dusty corners of his and San Lang’s room.

His phone buzzed.

Xie Lian! Can you meet tomorrow! I’ve been dying to see you!

Xie Lian sighed and tucked his phone beneath the covers. He pretended to be asleep when San Lang came in.

I Will Forever Be

Chapter Summary

Not me, posting at 9:30pm on a Friday! Ugh. My fingers don't type ideas fast enough!

Guys, I am afraid to post this chapter! Okay, okay, I can do it.

Thank you so much for your incredible support. This story is not perfect. I make many mistakes. But you are perfect.

So many incredible mug ideas from you guys! I am low key obsessed with the idea of Gorgo wanting to fit in with San Lang and Xie Lian and buying himself a 'world's best boss' mug. Thank you for the idea, friend!

Also, the one person heckling me so cutely? This chapter is for you.

Honestly, your comments mean so so so much to me. You'd know if you could see me curled up with my margarita, ugly crying over my laptop.

CW: mild gore and what could be considered suicidal ideation (if you squint). Please proceed with caution, my lovelies.

Rain in a foreign city was different from rain in a place one knew. The cacophony of the downpour filled Xie Lian's mind, lulling him and rousing him all at once. The bookshop windows rattled, and mist smeared the glass. As the skies grew darker, Xie Lian lit the lanterns.

He shelved books and sifted through memories. Old memories. Memories he usually hid from. But today, his melancholia could not be denied. Melancholia only made the memories sweeter and sharper. Sweet enough to coat his tongue. Sharp enough to pierce his heart. One could be unravelled by a memory.

The books hummed, whispering to one another on the shelves—some in ancient languages Xie Lian knew, and some in much, much older languages that raised the tiny hairs on the back of his neck. Of the ones he could understand, he was swept away by their stories, and as the morning wore on, he lost track of which thoughts were his own and which belonged to the books.

All morning, Xie Lian had watched Gorgo, waiting for his opportunity, though the bookshop owner had yet to even set foot in the office. He glanced at his phone. He had a few hours before he needed to meet Shi Qingxuan. But if Gorgo didn't create an array—as Xie Lian had often seen him do throughout the work day—he really had no idea how to travel back to the Mortal Realm.

“Gege is quiet today.” San Lang appeared at his side, leaning against the shelf.

Xie Lian smiled as he reached to reshelve an anthology of the world’s most violent deaths. He shoved down the rush of peace and contentment that always accompanied San Lang’s presence. He ignored the thrill of happiness that only came with San Lang’s attentions. When San Lang looked at him, Xie Lian was no longer invisible. He was no longer embarrassing or just good for a laugh that came at his own expense. With San Lang, Xie Lian existed in the world again.

But there was no banquet that didn’t come to an end. San Lang deserved better than a life in hiding, trapped in the Ghost Realm. Without Xie Lian’s terrible luck and dark past weighing him down, San Lang would flourish. He was brilliant and so full of zest. So full of sparkle. Yes, San Lang would flourish.

“Hnm. I’ve been listening to the stories these books have to share.”

San Lang hummed, listening to the books.

“You know, San Lang. I think I like Ghost City very much. Especially this shop.” And he did. Despite the strangeness of it all, despite the fact they were in Hua Cheng’s territory, despite the rapid thrumming of his heart at each new sight, Ghost City felt right. It felt like it could be home. In another life. Though, he would not have another life. Gods did not reenter the reincarnation cycle.

“Does Gege like it here better than the capital? We should stay here forever then.”

“San Lang,” he chided. “Are you…doing okay here?”

He eyed the mortal boy carefully, searching for signs of stress or overwhelm. But San Lang seemed right at home in the strange bookshop in the even stranger city. The red glow of the lanterns reflected in his crimson eye through the mask. He seemed relaxed, and an aura of mischief radiated from him.

San Lang nodded, his eyes sparkling. “As I said before, this is an adventure. I have no complaints other than our new coworker. Have you ever seen anyone eat so much in your life? He’s a garbage disposal!”

Xie Lian stifled a laugh. “San Lang! That’s unkind.”

“But, Gege, he’s so annoying! I wish it was just me and you again.”

“Mnm, so I shouldn’t have asked He Xuan to move in with us then? It might be too late to take it back now.”

San Lang’s shoulders tensed for a moment, then slumped, and he huffed a laugh. “Gege, are you trying to kill me?”

Xie Lian snickered.

“Gegeeee,” San Lang whined. He rested his head on Xie Lian’s shoulder, and Xie Lian patted him fondly.

“Don’t worry, San Lan. The only roommate I need is my beloved house spouse.” Xie Lian echoed San Lang’s words back to him. It ached to make such jokes, but now that he knew San Lang’s flirting was just silly teasing, he wanted to tease back—he wanted his final days—weeks at best—in San Lang’s company to be nice. A nice memory. Something he could hold on to during whatever came next. Whatever that was. Surely his Wu Ming knew the cursed shackled prevented him from dying. Had he found a way around its magic? Xie Lian’s belly burned with despair, but he kept a smile on his face beneath his mask.

He wanted these memories to hold on to at the end.

San Lang wheezed softly against Xie Lian’s shoulder, plastering himself to his side. He’d been extra sticky the past few days, and Xie Lian wondered if it was a symptom of his unease at having his life uprooted. If it was a symptom of stress.

“Gege, Gege, you can’t say such things to me. I might faint. I might spontaneously combust. I might waste away, waiting for another sweet word from Gege’s lips.”

“Ah, San Lang. So dramatic.”

“Gege doesn’t know the half of it.” San Lang sighed and stood up straight again. Xie Lian immediately missed the weight. The closeness. He supposed he might be a little sticky, too, these days, even though he was very used to having his life uprooted.

San Lang plucked a book from Xie Lian’s hands and slid it onto a higher shelf. “May I take you on a date this evening? Out into Ghost City? Allow this lowly husband to romance his gege properly?”

Silly teasing. Not real flirting. San Lang didn’t mean anything by it. Xie Lian tried to calm his racing heart, suddenly glad for the mask hiding his steaming face. “Ah, can’t. I have a date with He Xuan.”

San Lang choked, and Xie Lian burst out laughing, pleased to have finally got a one up on the menace standing before him.

“San Lang,” Gorgo called, a puff of cornflower-blue hair just visible above the book stack, the faerie lights lending the appearance of a halo. When he appeared, he was carrying an ornate wooden box full of yellowed scrolls. “Can you find a place for these?”

San Lang grunted in response and took the box from Gorgo.

“Tonight, Gege. You. Me. A proper date.” He nudged Xie Lian’s shoulder with his own and disappeared into the maze of overflowing bookshelves.

“Your Royal Highness, you may as well take your break. I have an errand to run, and I know He Xuan is hungry. Shocker. I won’t be here for lunch.” Gorgo dusted his hands on his tweed pants and ducked into the office, muttering to himself in Olde English.

Xie Lian's heart roared in his ears. He waited a moment and peeked through the moon gate into the Ghost City office. Gorgo was just finishing his array. He opened the door and stepped through. This was the opportunity Xie Lian had been waiting for. Without a moment's pause, he held his breath and followed after.

He stepped through the array, back into the bookshop in the Mortal Realm, just in time to see Gorgo disappear around the corner. Quietly, he closed the door. One of his sweaters still hung on the butterfly hook, and he snatched it, throwing it on to brave the elements.

His phone pinged. It was a message from Shi Qingxuan.

Xie Lian! I'm here!

Xie Lian tapped out a response.

Be right there! Only a few blocks away!

Then, for good measure, Xie Lian threw in a few silly emojis. He knew it annoyed Mu Qing, but Shi Qingxuan was always in good spirits. He might appreciate the gesture. Was he the only one baffled by modern technology?

It was equally as gloomy in the Mortal Realm as in Ghost City. The rain came down in sheets, battering the old buildings. It was strange—he'd only been away from the bookshop for a few days, but already it seemed…duller. Greyer. Ghost City was so vivid, so alive and wild, the capital seemed diminished by comparison. Xie Lian suddenly realised that, if he had the chance, he would choose to stay permanently in Ghost City. Wu Ming's city.

Wu Ming.

Oh, Wu Ming.

In his mind's eye, he could see the ghost now, on his knees before Xie Lian.

His Highness will always be His Highness.

I am forever your most devoted believer.

Xie Lian's body hummed with nerves, as though it was full of bees, and honey dripped sluggishly from the tines of his ribs. He swallowed thickly. Using every drop of his martial prowess, he silently snuck by Gorgo, who was unlocking one of the rare book cabinets—it was easier to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. He was sure Gorgo wouldn't be too bothered by his sneaking. Hopefully the ancient ghost wouldn't fire him.

There were two girls working at the front counter of the Mortal Realm bookshop, neither of whom Xie Lian had never seen before. They were sharing a carton of takeout noodles from the same shop San Lang and Xie Lian used to order from. They giggled, their chopsticks clicking, and Xie Lian's eyes prickled hot. He didn't have time to be sentimental. Time was of the essence.

He pushed open the shop doors with a chime, and took off running down the street. His break wasn't terribly long, and he'd need to catch Gorgo before he created the array back to Ghost City.

He would have asked Lord Wind Master to meet him in Ghost City, but a small voice in the back of his head had warned against sharing his location with anyone—even someone as trustworthy as Shi Qingxuan. He thought again of San Lang's words about his 'shouting friend' and how it had likely been Feng Xin who had given their hiding spot away. When he thought about it, it seemed likely. Ah, it could be, it could be. Feng Xin could be a little oblivious, but his heart was always in the right place. He still wasn't sure if Mu Qing would mind terribly if Hua Cheng finally succeeded in killing him.

Xie Lian frowned. His new shoes, the ones San Lang had bought for him, splashed through puddles as he ran. Despite the wetness of the streets, his feet stayed warm and dry. Suspiciously dry. As though the shoes were spelled. Ah, but that was impossible. They came from a mortal shop, after all.

Shi Qingxuan was sitting by the window of a ritzy cafe Xie Lian had never before visited. When they saw Xie Lian, they jumped to their feet, smoothing their black leather pants and teal cashmere sweater. They were in their male form today, their grin wide and joyful. They opened their mouth to call out to Xie Lian, but in the last moment, slapped a hand over their mouth and waved guiltily.

"That was close, Your Highness," they stage whispered. "Just about shouted your name for the whole city to hear. Oops."

Xie Lian smiled. "It's good to see you, Lord Wind Master."

"Ha ha ha ha, what have I said, Your Highness! Call me Qingxuan. We are bestest friends, afterall!" Shi Qingxuan dragged a chair across the black and white tiles for Xie Lian. "Sit, sit!"

Xie Lian took a seat opposite Shi Qingxuan. The cafe was busy, laughter and conversation echoing off the industrial ceilings. The air was humid. Close. Beyond the windows, lightning ripped across the sky. A woman walked by using a newspaper to shield herself from the downpour.

"Your Highness, you're soaked! I ordered you a caramel macchiato to help you warm up. I thought to myself, who doesn't like a syrupy-sweet coffee?"

Xie Lian took a sip of the drink before him. It was so sweet, it hurt his teeth, but he smiled. "My gratitude, Qingxuan. This is delicious. It's nice to see you."

"Hmm, hmm, yes, but how are you? No one has any idea where you've been. Your generals are concerned that your friend, what's his name…San Lang has kidnapped you."

Xie Lian laughed softly. "San Lang? Why are they concerned about him?"

Shi Qingxuan took a sip of their own coffee. Their nails were painted sparkly blue, and they tapped them on the porcelain of their cup. “They didn’t say much. Just that he was creepy and wore a lot of butterfly jewellery, which they found suspect. And he wears red.”

“He wears butterfly jewellery and wears red,” Xie Lian repeated. “And this is reason enough to cast aspersions?”

It wasn’t that Xie Lian had never noticed San Lang’s jewellery. Or his preference for the colour red. It just wasn’t enough to doubt a friend who had protected him and cared for him. Who’d shown him kindness in a world of cruelty. Who’d made him laugh and feel safe. Who made him feel alive again.

Xie Lian released a shaky breath. “I…ah…it’s just that—”

“Yes, what is it, Your Highness?”

Xie Lian took another sip of his sugary drink. “I know Hua Cheng. Well, I mean, we have a shared trauma.”

“A shared trauma?”

Xie Lian laughed awkwardly, waving his hand. He was sweating down his sides, and his hands shook. “It’s complicated. I…got him—” He closed his eyes and breathed past the panic. “I got him dispersed.”

“What?” Qingxuan almost dropped their coffee. They set it gently in its saucer with a clink, flipping their long, dark ponytail over their shoulder. “But, Your Highness, if a ghost is dispersed…how could they regain a corporeal form? It’s impossible.”

“Ah, well, apparently it can happen. Anyway. Due to my actions, Hua Cheng has every right to his grievance against me. But as for San Lang…well, why would Hua Cheng find me in disguise and stay by my side, all the while burning down villages and killing the people I care about? Sending me bloody messages? Sounds unlikely, doesn’t it?”

And if San Lang wasn’t truly who he said he was—if he bore a hard grievance against Xie Lian—why hide? Why befriend him, other than to rip his heart out in the end? He couldn’t imagine his kind and loyal friend ever betraying him. Not the San Lang he’d come to know so well. San Lang. His sweet, brave, kind San Lang. He would never hurt Xie Lian.

“And you’re very sure Hua Cheng, The Crimson Rain Sought Flower, a devastation ranked ghost king and Lord of Ghost City, is the ghost you…um…ha ha ha ha…Your Highness, this really is too much.”

“En. I’m sure it’s him.” He’d worn Wu Ming’s mask. The only other soul who had knowledge of that mask was Bai Wuxiang, and he was long dead. Felled by the Heavenly Emperor himself.

Shi Qingxuan frowned. “Well, what about those 33 gods Hua Cheng killed? And Xuan Zhen and Nan Yang? Why did Hua Cheng go after them?”

Xie Lian shrugged. “I don’t know Hua Cheng’s grievance with them. Mu Qing and Feng Xin don’t know either, though Hua Cheng has left them along for centuries now. Another mystery. I do wonder if it’s connected to me somehow, as we are all of the same era. All from Xianle.”

Shi Qingxuan looked thoughtful. A swift wind slapped beads of rain against the window. “Your Highness, how can I help? I’m here, and I want you to know that you aren’t alone in this.”

Xie Lian took a steadying breath. “Ah…ah…that’s—” He swallowed. “Lord Wind Master, could you agree not to share my request with anyone else? Even if you don’t agree to help?”

“Of course, Your Highness. You can count on me!”

“You might not be quite so enthusiastic once I’ve asked. Ah, well, here goes nothing. My reason for asking you here is to do with San Lang, actually,” Xie Lian said, running his finger through a drop of condensation on the table.

“Oh?”

“Mnm. I am worried for him. Hua Cheng has already targeted him once—almost killed him—and I can’t allow it to happen again. We are in hiding now, but I don’t know how long it will hold. I’m wondering…”

“Go on,” Shi Qingxuan encouraged. Lord Wind Master really was too reliable!

“I’m wondering if you would take him into your care until I’ve…resolved things. Ah, perhaps take him to Heaven with you for a short while? Temporarily appoint him? Just until it’s all over. He wouldn’t want to be in Heaven for long anyway.”

Shi Qingxuan gave him a hard look. “What do you mean ‘all over’?”

Xie Lian steeled himself. “I’m going to find Hua Cheng. This has gone on long enough. Too many people have died because of me. I should never have run in the first place.”

Fate could not be rewritten. The past could not be overturned. He was out of time.

“Your Highness”—Shi Qingxuan’s voice had gone very soft—“there must be some other way. What about asking Jun Wu? The Heavenly Emperor—”

“—has known about this for two millennia, Qingxuan. His hands are tied. Anyway, isn’t this better than allowing more innocent people to get hurt?”

“I can’t say it’s better, no. I don’t want you to be hurt.” Shi Qingxuan rubbed their eyes with the heels of their hands. “This is…I just can’t see the Heavenly Emperor being okay with you going up against the Red Calamity without spiritual powers. With…with ha ha ha ha ha with a cursed shackle! Your Highness, Your Highness…how could you ask me not to tell anyone! Ha ha ha ha you’ve put me in a really bad spot here!”

Guilt weighed him down. He knew he'd be putting Shi Qingxuan in a bad spot—Qingxuan who had only ever been kind to him. Who had only ever supported him. And this was how Xie Lian repaid their kindness.

"Qingxuan, I'm…I'm sorry. I had no one else to turn to. I just…it's been—" Panic rose inside him again. It felt as though someone was sitting on his chest.

"No, no, I'm glad you felt you could turn to me. Afterall, there are very few who would consider me a worthy ally! Or trustworthy for that matter! Ha ha ha. But, Your Highness! Shouldn't we ask your generals for their help? No, nevermind, what am I ever saying right now."

Xie Lian grinned sheepishly and stared down into his coffee. Thin strings of caramel hung off the lip like spider legs, and he suddenly longed for Ghost City. He'd become attached so quickly! For a banished god who shielded himself from connection, who refused to let himself get attached, that was really saying something.

"I don't think I can ask them. They wouldn't understand. Mu Qing and Feng Xin are…ah…" He trailed off. They, too, had a complicated history.

"Say no more, Your Highness. I understand completely. But how do you plan to fight Hua Cheng without spiritual powers?"

"I don't intend to fight him. I would never hurt him."

Shi Qingxuan was silent for a long moment. "Oh," they finally said. "And what about your San Lang? Won't he be sad if something happens to you? It sounds like he is quite the friend."

Xie Lian swallowed mouthful after mouthful of grief. A shiver chased over him, and goosebumps covered his clammy skin. It was getting more and more difficult not to succumb to his panic. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry, to scream or go to sleep.

Love was a double-edged sword. Ah, no, but he couldn't think of it that way. He was lucky to have loved, just once. Just once.

Just once.

And San Lang was truly someone very special. Now it was time to let him go. Bad things would only fall upon him if Xie Lian selfishly kept him in his orbit—his bad luck enough to destroy them both.

"He is. Which is why I have to do this." Xie Lian drowned the last of his coffee. His phone buzzed in his pocket. A text from San Lang.

Gege, where'd you go? This San Lang is worried.

He bit his lip. "I should go, Qingxuan. Thank you so much for meeting me."

"Your Highness, where are you staying now?"

Xie Lian rose to his feet, slipping his sweater over his head. It was still wet. “I can’t say. It isn’t that I don’t trust you—of course I do—but I still don’t know how Hua Cheng has been finding me. I need to be…careful. At least for now.”

Lord Wind Master also stood. “Fair, fair. You just let me know when you need me. I will be there, Your Highness. I’ll take your San Lang with me to Heaven.”

For a moment, Xie Lian found it difficult to swallow. “Qingxuan. Thank you. I…thank you.”

Qingxuan smirked, but their bright blue-green eyes held depths of sadness. “You’d better get back to your San Lang, then.”

Xie Lian bowed and turned for the door.

The rain was coming down harder now, and the sidewalks were mostly empty of pedestrians. His phone buzzed again in his pocket, and he knew he needed to hurry so San Lang wouldn’t worry. He turned down a narrow passway, picking up speed. Hopefully Gorgo would still be in the Mortal Realm, puttering around the bookshop.

Xie Lian’s nerve endings buzzed, and pressure built behind his eyes. For reasons he didn’t understand, his heart was racing. Was he having a panic attack?

He pulled his phone out to message San Lang back, to buy himself some time, but—

The world was swept away from beneath his feet, and he was flying, his vision blurring.

Time slowed.

The world slowed.

The only sound was the reverberating thud of his heart in his ears.

His body hit the brick wall with a harrowing crack, and Xie Lian was gasping for breath, fighting back nausea. His bones whistled, as though they were hollow reeds, and his vision sparked and darkened.

He choked on mouthfuls of hot, sticky blood, trying to find which way was up, but his limbs wouldn’t obey. He groaned, rain splattering his cheeks.

The chime of bells. A flash of silver.

Black boots hit the pavement in front of him.

Xie Lian rolled over, and looked up at the darkening sky. His body spasmed, and blood gushed from his nose and mouth.

A man stood over him. A beautiful man in crimson robes and silver jewellery. He wore a black patch over one eye, and his other eye gleamed with the depths of the infinite universe. His skin was porcelain white, so pale, so pale, and his hair was black as ink, spilling around his shoulders.

Xie Lian couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe.

Blood pooled beneath him like a warm bath, and his body screamed in agony. His fingers twitched, and he shuddered.

“Your Royal Highness,” Hua Cheng said. He lowered to one knee, a white flower appearing in the palm of his hand. The other hand held a rattling scimitar—a jewel-red eye embedded into its ornate silver filigree—to Xie Lian’s throat. “I will forever be your most devoted believer.”

Little Ghost

Chapter Notes

You guys. You GUYS! AHHHHH YOU ARE ALL ANGELS! Your support has meant SO much to me! All the sweet and wonderful heckling has dazzled my heart and basically wrote this chapter. Your comments FUEL ME! I read and reread every comment and shout and cry! I am just die. I am die. Thank you to Ghost City and back.

I would like to say a very happy belated birthday to one of my very cute and very favourite hecklers. I hope you had a wonderful day!!!

Soooooo....the last chapter (evil cliffhanger chapter) now has THE MOST FUCKING BEAUTIFUL ART IN THE WORLD!!! Thank you so much to Saenda for bringing it all to life with your magic. BEHOLD!!!! Saenda truly is pure magic.

A few content warnings for this chapter: canon-typical violence. Mentions of canon-typical suicide. Mentions of suicidal thoughts. Some sexually abusive language, though very mild. Please take care of yourselves, lovely friends!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His heart was a blind guide, leading him through the centuries to this moment.

Wu Ming.

He'd imagined it many times. He'd imagined it in vivid colour, visceral, the tang of blood on his tongue—he'd manifested it—but nothing could compare to the true moment unfurling before him. Was this real? Was this happening?

Wu Ming.

The ghost who had taken Xie Lian's terrible sins upon himself, who had died in agony to spare Xie Lian the consequences of his own actions, who had been his last believer.

He was here.

Wu Ming.

WU MING!

Xie Lian took a shuddering breath, a sharp pain from his broken rib sending bolts of lightning to his brain. Blood gurgled in the back of his throat, and rain battered his too-hot skin. He urged himself to move, to get up, to get away from the crushing killing intent, but his limbs would not obey. He didn't really want them to obey.

Was this real? Was this happening?

Hua Cheng looked down at him, a strange look in his black eye—a look somewhere between desire and disgust. The demonic scimitar rattled at Xie Lian's throat, its red eye blinking rapidly. It shook, as though it was afraid. As though it grieved.

"Your Royal Highness." Hua Cheng's full lips curved into a viscous grin. "My prince. My god. At last."

Xie Lian swallowed back tears—strange emotion welled up inside him, filling his throat with stars. "Wu Ming, Hua Cheng, I would have"—he choked on a mouthful of blood—"I didn't know it was you. Wu Ming…"

"Wu Ming. Nameless. Such cruelty from the lips of my god," Hua Cheng sneered. E-Ming's blade pressed against Xie Lian's throat, drawing a thin line of blood. Could the cursed blade cut through his cursed shackle?

Was this real? Was this happening?

"Yes," Xie Lian whispered, "I was cruel. I was…ah…Wu Ming…I deserve…"

Hua Cheng's teeth flashed, sharp fangs glinting in the dimly lit passageway. "What do you deserve, Your Highness?"

What had Wu Ming suffered? What loneliness, what agony, what despair? It was all Xie Lian's fault. He had done this. His cruelty and selfishness was to blame. Xie Lian had left a path of destruction and despair in his wake. The God of Misfortune.

The jewelled red eye of the scimitar spun and spun, shedding tears like diamonds. Something about it, the sadness in its eye, caused a sharp pain in Xie Lian's heart. He panted around his sorrow, his regrets stacking along his spine, his chest swelling with longing.

Why…why did that red eye look so familiar? The familiarity drew him in, and he caved in on himself.

Rain drops plinked and spattered off E-Ming's long, thin blade. The scimitar rattled and shook—a whine of metal—and Hua Cheng choked it in his long-fingered grip. Xie Lian wanted to tell him to stop.

Xie Lian collapsed back against the cobblestones beneath him, his body limp. Rivulets of his blood mixed with the rush of rainwater through the gutter. Black dots danced across his vision. It was hard to breathe around the sharp pain in his chest. This was what he had chosen. It was the only way. He had chosen to surrender, so surrender he would. For his San Lang.

It was over now.

It was over.

"I will leave that up to you, Lord Crimson Rain."

“You’ll leave it up to me?” Hua Cheng raised a single black brow. “How dangerous. Seeing you this way now makes one ache. Makes one excited. Do you know the things I’ve imagined doing to my cruel and vicious little god? I might get carried away.”

Xie Lian shuddered, fear sparking in his belly. “I deserve whatever you’ve imagined.”

“Hmn.” Hua Cheng tilted his head. “I wonder if you’ll still feel that way once I’ve begun. After All, two painful deaths such as mine—both in the name of my heartless god—alter the soul. I am not who I was, nor will I ever be. Thanks to you, Your Highness. You destroyed me. Utterly.”

The scimitar rattled and whined. It almost seemed like it was trying to fly out of Hua Cheng’s hand. Xie Lian found he could no longer look at E-Ming. Something about the demonic scimitar took his breath away—and that something was rising inside Xie Lian, hot and ugly. It tasted like grief. It tasted sour, like a memory gone off.

“I…I—” Xie Lian vomited blood down the front of his shirt, and Hua Cheng laughed.

“Only you could make vomiting blood look so pretty.” He crushed the white flower in his hand and tossed it aside in favour of running his long, slender fingers through Xie Lian’s blood-soaked hair. “Have you dreamed of me, Your Highness? I admit, I have dreamed of little else—my sleeping hours are consumed by fantasies of these wide golden eyes of yours. This delicate little point of your chin. The fine white-jade pillar of your slender neck. My god is so lovely. So cruel. So destructive and hateful. So lovely.”

Xie Lian wanted to speak. He had so many things he wished to say—had dreamed of saying to Wu Ming—but he was afraid if he opened his mouth again, terrible, broken sounds would escape.

The ghost king sheathed E-Ming at his side and wrapped his cold fingers around Xie Lian’s throat. With a lurch and a swoop of gravity, Xie Lian was suspended in the air like a rag doll, his feet dangling. His body jerked, and he thrashed, gasping for breath, as Hua Cheng tightened his grip around his throat.

Ruoye shot into the air in a frenzy and slashed at Wu Ming’s shoulders, his arms, his neck. The demonic silk band cut a red ribbon on one of Wu Ming’s pale cheeks.

“Ruoye, no!” Xie Lian gurgled. His words came out in a wet wheeze, Hua Cheng’s fingers collapsing his windpipe. Darkness leaked from the corners of his vision, and blood curdled beneath his tongue. “Ruoye! Don’t hurt him!”

Wu Ming laughed again, and the deep, rich sound sent a chill through him. He sounded so much like San Lang. So, so much. The same texture, the same deep richness. And now that he was face-to-face with the ghost of his past, he saw how very much Hua Cheng looked like San Lang. Exquisit. Pale. Thick, raven-feather hair, lustrous and wild. A luxurious fan of thick lashes, impossibly long and black. A turbulent beauty.

Ah, San Lang. San Lang. He hadn’t had a chance to say goodbye—to gift him Ruoye. His silk band liked San Lang so much—they could have looked after one another.

“Won’t you fight back, Your Highness?” Hua Cheng cooed. “Won’t you honour me with your vitriol and selfishness? For millennia, I have longed for a single vile word from my beautiful god. Destroy me again, Your Highness. Let me be consumed in ecstasy by your hate.”

Xie Lian gurgled, a fine mist of blood escaping his lips.

Hua Cheng’s grin widened, imbued with a manic rage. “Perhaps this form is not to your liking, Your Highness? Allow me.” And he shifted. Still tall, but slightly narrower, clad in black armour. His glossy raven hair was tied in a high ponytail, and a white mask covered his face with a crescent-eyed smile.

Xie Lian’s heart leapt, and his blood turned to ice.

“Wu Ming…” Xie Lian whispered, hot tears stinging his face. Grief and shame burned in his belly. He had done this. He had done this. He deserved this, ah, he…Wu Ming…ah, Wu Ming. It was time. This would bring balance. It would be the end of it.

Without warning, Wu Ming smashed Xie Lian’s head into the brick wall, and for a moment, everything went dark. Xie Lian blinked rapidly, his ears ringing and his teeth aching. He’d felt the back of his skull crack. He didn’t know how much longer he could hold on to consciousness.

“Your Highness,” he purred from behind the bone-white mask. “So pretty. So, so pretty. I love seeing you like this.”

Xie Lian’s despair sharpened. He gagged on blood. Fingers of darkness reached across his vision, closing in on him.

“Wu Ming,” Xie Lian whispered.

“Yes, Your Royal Highness? Would you like to ask for my mercy? Or perhaps just a kiss to soften the blow?”

“Take your fucking hands off him.” A familiar voice cut through Xie Lian’s storm of emotions and fear, and every hair on his body stood on end.

Wu Ming stiffened but did not turn around. Xie Lian couldn’t see his eye behind the mask. “Hmn. I wondered if your little friend would come. He should have died in the explosion. Oh well. He will die now.”

“Gege!” San Lang shouted.

No.

NO.

San Lang!!

Xie Lian shook violently. He blinked away the blood that dripped into his eyes, searching for San Lang, hysteria rising in his throat.

“Gege!” San Lang stood in the mouth of the alley, a murderous look in his eyes, his lips pulled back into a snarl, and Xie Lian’s stomach dropped. San Lang held a sword in his hands, and it took Xie Lian a moment to recognize it as the sword Feng Xin had loaned him.

“San Lang! No!” Xie Lian’s voice was shredded, wet. “You have to run! He’ll…he’ll kill you! San Lang! Don’t…don’t—”

Wu Ming tightened his grip so Xie Lian couldn’t breathe at all, and he laughed. “Your Highness has found a new ghost to destroy, I see. Was it so easy to replace your Wu Ming? I must admit, I’m a little jealous.”

San Lang whipped forward in a blur of red, his movements ghostly and unnatural. Xie Lian couldn’t force his thoughts to catch up. How had San Lang moved so fast? How…how…ah…he wasn’t safe! San Lang wasn’t safe! He needed to…he had to…

Xie Lian writhed in Wu Ming’s grip, kicking and clawing. He mouthed the words “San Lang” but he couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe.

Suddenly E-Ming was in Wu Ming’s hand again, and the ghost king spun around, pressing Xie Lian’s back to his chest, the point of his blade at Xie Lian’s throat.

“You seek your own death,” San Lang spat, fury in his shadow and flame eyes. “Wu Ming. The perfect name for a ghost no one will remember once I’m done with you.”

“You know,” Wu Ming drawled, dragging E-Ming’s tip along Xie Lian’s jaw. The scimitar rattled chaotically. “I do believe my blade can cut through this cursed shackle. What do you think, little ghost? Hmn? Shall we find out?”

San Lang’s eyes were bright—sizzling fire and sparkling midnight—and he flashed a toothy grin. He raised Feng Xin’s sword and balanced it along his forearm in a flawless martial stance. “If you think your deaths were painful, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

Wu Ming chuckled, his voice low and velvety. Deeper than San Lang’s, but so similar. It was disorienting. “And who are you, little ghost, to stand against a ghost king?”

San Lang visibly paled, which was quite the feat considering how pale he was to begin with. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. It was as if he was frozen.

“Go on, little ghost. Have something to say? Something to share?”

San Lang stood frozen.

Ruoye lashed out again, gouging Wu Ming’s neck, and the ghost king hissed, swatting at the silk band with E-Ming.

Xie Lian used the opportunity. He summoned the last of his energy, reaching deep within himself for any godly strength he could muster. In one brutal move, he cracked the back of his head into Wu Ming’s jaw and elbowed him in the gut. Xie Lian saw stars, and his belly churned with acid, but Wu Ming dropped him, and Xie Lian flipped out of reach.

With a yowl of rage, Wu Ming launched himself at Xie Lian, demonic scimitar held aloft. He moved forward in a terrifying blur, but Xie Lian was nimble and quick, and flipped back before E-Ming could slice him open from throat to navel. Wu Ming dogged his steps, and swiped at him again. Xie Lian spun with grace, eluding the attack. He was sweating, bleeding, ready to pass out. How was he supposed to get San Lang out of here?

The alley darkened—it was as if all the daylight had drained away, leaking out of the atmosphere. The only light was San Lang's blazing eyes.

San Lang moved like shadow. Like silk. Like water. His movements were lethal. Graceful. Diabolical. Those of a demon or a god.

The clash of swords vibrated through Xie Lian's teeth, and terror set his blood on fire. San Lang dodged a blow from E-Ming, and swept forward with his own violent attack, just missing Wu Ming's neck. It was a deadly dance, leaping and whirling, the ground beneath them shaking with the force of their battle. The clang of metal sang in the air—Xie Lian could taste that metal on his tongue.

"San Lang!" Xie Lian shouted. He needed to end this, but how? He had no weapon, no spiritual powers. His injuries were severe. "Wu Ming!"

A wind rose up, whipping dried leaves and rain into a funnel, whistling past the shells of Xie Lian's ears. A perfectly arched spiritual arrow carried on the sudden gale, piercing through Wu Ming's hand. Another in his chest. Another in his shoulder.

Wu Ming seemed not to notice, so engaged in battle with San Lang was he. His white mask ginned eerily as he leapt elegantly over a fourth arrow.

The wind intensified. A crackle of fire ignited into a wall of flame, surrounding Wu Ming, dancing flames reflecting off the porcelain of his mask.

From one breath to the next, San Lang was before him, his hands on Xie Lian's face, tipping his chin one way, then the other. The dangerous spark in his gaze sent shivers chasing over Xie Lian. San Lang…San Lang was a ghost. He was a ghost. Xie Lian's heart thrummed with adrenaline. Sorrow hummed in his bones. San Lang was dead.

"Your Highness!" Feng Xing and Mu Xin appeared through the wall of wind and flame. To Xie Lian's great shock, Lord Wind Master was right behind them, accompanied by another god Xie Lian didn't know—a god with liquid blue eyes and long dark hair, a cruel smirk on his face.

Wu Ming walked through the torrent of flame. He tilted his head to the side. He crouched low, ready to attack.

Ruoye lashed out again, sending Wu Ming's white mask flying.

Xie Lian gasped, his heart stumbling.

Beneath the mask, Wu Ming wore white bandages over his right eye. He was younger. Barely 17. Xie Lian's heart pulsed, and he gagged on stomach acid and blood.

It was the young soldier who had been with him at Beizi Hill, who'd stood guard in a protective array while the Land of the Tender taunted them. He was…he was the little boy Xie Lian had caught during the Shang Yuan festival parade.

Xie Lian swayed. His shoulders slumped, and he took a shaky breath. The world was darker now. Heavier. Xie Lian could still feel Wu Ming's hand around his neck.

"Hong…Hong'er?" Xie Lian whispered. "Is it…ah…ah…is it you?"

San Lang wrapped an arm around Xie Lian's waist and pulled him close. San Lang was shaking. Xie Lian shook with him.

Wu Ming smiled—such a heart-stopping smile. So familiar. So beloved. With one deft swipe, Wu Ming snatched Ruoye out of the air without even looking. "So clever, Your Highness. It only took you two thousand years to figure it out."

"Ruoye!" Xie Lian cried. Oh, but his heart couldn't take it. This was the worst possible outcome. His friends were in grave danger! "Please, Wu Ming…please…I—"

"Hua Cheng, you bastard!" Feng Xin growled. He raised his bow and nocked an arrow. "This ends now. You will not touch His Highness again!"

Mu Qing said nothing. He raised his zhanmadao and fell into an attack stance. He was pale, his lips pulled into a thin line. Was he afraid? He should be.

"Your Highness, stay behind your generals!" Shi Qingxuan called, fanning the wind and flames with their spiritual device.

"This white band of yours, Your Royal Highness," Wu Ming said, "do your valiant and loyal friends know its origin?"

Xie Lian blinked. His eyes weren't tracking properly anymore. His teeth rattled with adrenaline and shock.

"Hmn." Wu Ming inspected Ruoye closely. "Is your Ruoye not the very silk band your parents, the King and Queen of Xianle, used to hang themselves with? Is this not the very silk band you tried to hang yourself with?"

Feng Xin and Mu Qing stiffened. Xie Lian could not see their faces.

"Why don't you just shut the fuck up?" said the god Xie Lian didn't know. "Do you know how fucking stupid you sound telling these idiotic stories?"

Ah, but they weren't stories. Somehow Wu Ming knew the truth of Ruoye's birth. But how? How could he have known? How could anyone have known?

“That’s not all, is it Your Highness?” Wu Ming said. He sheathed E-Ming once more, holding the squirming Ruoye in both hands, as though he was about to tear it apart. Xie Lian froze, his heart whirring. “This band was already soaked in royal blood. Was it not the silk Bai Wuxiang used to bind you to the altar? Was it not the band that held you in place as you were stabbed 100 times by a crowd desperate for immunity against Human Face Disease? I was there, Your Highness. I was the little ghost fire trapped in Bai Wuxiang’s claws. Do you remember?” He laughed. “I remember. Your beautiful body was nothing more than ground meat splattered across the temple floor. That was the night I became a wrath.”

Mu Qing and Feng Xin sputtered and cried out.

Xie Lian swallowed, his heart as dense as a dead star. He remembered that little ghost fire. He remembered. He…ah…

There was a flash of terrible light. San Lang’s eyes glowed bright, and the flames roared higher, ripping through the narrow passageway. Lord Wind Master’s fan flew out of their hands.

“Hey!” they shrieked.

“Your Highness,” Wu Ming said, “we shall meet again soon.” He bowed low, mockingly low, and was all at once engulfed by a curtain of flame.

When the flames cleared, Hua Cheng—Wu Ming, Hong’er—was gone.

Had it been real? Had it really happened?

Ruoye twisted and wormed through the air, crazed and jerking. Once it realised Hua Cheng was gone, it flew in a blur to Xie Lian and wrapped around his wrist once more.

The embers of the fire sizzled in the heavy rainfall. The passway was quiet. Still.

Xie Lian was having trouble holding his feet. He leaned heavily against San Lang. His lips were numb, and his limbs tingled.

“Gege,” San Lang whispered. Hands were all over him without touching, checking for injury, swiping blood-soaked hair from his face. But his eyes, filled with terror and concern, would not meet Xie Lian’s.

“Get your hands off him!” Feng Xin growled, an arrow still nocked, but now pointed at San Lang.

Mu Qing sheathed his sabre and crossed his arms. “We told you he was sketchy, Your Highness. He’s a ghost! Your precious San Lang has been lying to you this whole time.”

San Lang flashed his teeth. “General Big Dick and the Sweeping General. I am surprised to see you both here. Don’t you usually fuck off at the first sign of trouble?”

Xie Lian could hardly think. Emotion closed around his throat. Now that Hua Cheng was gone—now that his friends were safe—all he wanted was to go to sleep.

“Please…Feng Xin,” Xie Lian rasped. His voice was like silk over sandpaper, and his throat hurt. His eyes watered “Put your weapon down. A lot has just happened, and we are all a little worked up.”

“Don’t try to speak, Gege,” San Lang murmured. “Your throat is damaged.”

Xie Lian nodded, threading his fingers through San Lang’s, and San Lang gasped softly.

Mu Qing rolled his eyes. “Told you,” he said to Feng Xin. After a moment, Feng Xin lowered his bow.

Feng Xin cleared his throat, pointedly ignoring their joined hands. “Your Highness, where have you been hiding? You won’t answer any of our calls or texts—”

“Do you ever stop bitching and moaning?” San Lang snapped. “Now is not the time. His Highness is injured and has just suffered a terrible shock.” He turned his keen gaze on Xie Lian—his eyes glowed faintly, crimson fire and midnight. “Gege, may this lowly one take you home?”

Through the veil of heavy emotion—through the sizzling terror—Xie Lian couldn’t help but notice San Lang sounded nervous. He squeezed San Lang’s hand and nodded.

“Your Highness, we’re coming with you!” Feng Xin and Mu Qing said in unison.

“The fuck you are,” San Lang said.

“Like you can stop us, little ghost,” Mu Qing sneered.

San Lang raised both black brows. “I can. And I will. Wherever you two are, trouble follows. Or did you not happen to notice my building blown to dust after you oh so stealthily followed us home? Hua Cheng only has to listen for your loud voices to track down His Highness.”

“You’re the one who lied to His Highness about being a ghost! What the fuck!”

“Ha ha ha ha, generals!” Shi Qingxuan said, their voice shaky and high. “Didn’t His Highness just ask everyone to calm down? Aiya, we need to get His Highness somewhere safe.”

“He’s right,” Feng Xin said. “Hua Cheng could return at any moment.”

Mu Qing looked around. “Where did Earth Master Yi go?”

“Oh, he’s always pulling chute,” Shi Qingxuan said. “Gone back to Heaven, I assume. So grumpy after being called away from supper.”

Xie Lian was shaking, blood blurring his vision. He was fairly certain he had a concussion. The ground tipped toward him, but San Lang’s strong arms would not let him fall.

Ruoye, finished with its shivering and clinging, unfurled from Xie Lian’s wrist and wrapped tightly around his head, soaking up the blood at the back of his skull.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin watched the silk band warily, their spines rigid. They knew. Now they knew everything. There would be questions. Xie Lian had hoped they would never know.

“San Lang?” Xie Lian swallowed a mouthful of blood. His ears were ringing, and he thought a rib bone might have punctured his lung. “I got blood over the nice shoes you bought me.”

San Lang frowned and brushed Xie Lian’s hair behind his ear. “Gege, Gege, they’re just shoes. Please, don’t talk. You need to rest.”

The grey skies above had deepened to a jewel-toned azure blue. The misting rain seemed to hang in the air rather than fall, and the glossy cobblestones reflected blurry ribbons of city light.

Xie Lian nodded, leaning heavily into San Lang’s side.

San Lang grit his teeth. “If you fools insist on coming, you need to keep your gobs shut. Understand? That means no fighting. And watch your tone with His Highness.”

“Fine. Whatever,” Mu Qing huffed. He shot Xie Lian a look. A look that made Xie Lian want to throw up. “I’ll need to see to His Highness’ injuries anyway. You can calm down anytime, little ghost.”

“Where are we going then, Sir San Lang?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

San Lang smirked. “Ghost City.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s mouths fell open.

***

To avoid compromising the bookshop, they portalled back to Ghost City through San Lang’s beautifully drawn array. Xie Lian couldn’t help but watch in awe. San Lang was a very powerful ghost indeed. Quite impressive, certainly, certainly. But he was still San Lang. Of course they would need to talk now, but it wasn’t very important. San Lang would have had his reasons for not sharing. It really wasn’t any of Xie Lian’s business anyway. The only thing that mattered was that San Lang was safe. The rest didn’t bear thinking about.

They were safe. They were all safe.

They came through to a wine cellar with more bottles of fine wine than even the royal Xianle wine cellar had kept. Xie Lian donned his sparkling peach mask and San Lang his crimson and silver mask, while the three gods changed their form to something less recognizable—also all masked.

The door at the top of the stairs creaked open, flooding the wine cellar with light. In the doorway, stood a tall man in black. He wore a smiling mask, and for a moment, Xie Lian couldn’t breathe. But when he looked closer, he saw the man was nothing like Wu Ming. Though he was tall, he was slightly hunched, with a long brown braid hanging over his shoulder. And his white mask wasn’t the familiar crescent-eyed smile but a woeful grin.

Gorgo stood at his side, his hair now a fluffy lilac colour. His brows shot up when he saw the group standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“Your Royal Highness,” Gorgo said. “That was a very long lunch break.”

Chapter End Notes

Come shout at me on Tumblr if you'd like. it me I don't have the Twitter. I barely internet.

I Am Not Who I Was

Chapter Summary

I am posting a little later in the week than I'd intended! I have been working on a secret one-shot collab for you guys that I am really excited about! More about that soon.

Your comments will be the death of me. I am swooning for you all! Your heckling makes me so warm and fuzzy inside! And your amazing big-brained detective work had me shouting and kicking my feet! How are you guys even this amazing?

This chapter feels a bit transitional, but the next chapter...some of the tags come into play. Read dem tags.

Next chapter will hopefully be up on Saturday, and if I'm late, you know the drill.

CW: canon-typical mentions of suicide, canon-typical mentions of the coffin, Mu Qing's attitude, Feng Xin's earnest cluelessness

“Are we back in Ghost City, San Lang?”

“Shhh, Gege, your throat. Yes, we’re back in Ghost City.”

“Your San Lang is right, Your Highness! You should rest your voice!” Shi Qingxuan’s gaze flickered nervously over the blood covering the front of Xie Lian’s sweater—to the blood running from his ears and the blood matted in his hair. “Ha ha ha ha, oh my, oh my, you are just covered in blood. Oh my.”

The Wind Master had taken on their female form, though plainer than usual. Paler and thin-lipped. Their mask only covered their eyes but was adorned with curled silver lines, lending the appearance of a gusting wind.

San Lang half-dragged, half-carried Xie Lian up the stairs, his arm snuggly wrapped around his waist. Xie Lian’s legs were like rubber, and hot blood pooled at the back of his head, absorbed by Ruoye. The white silk band shuddered. Xie Lian was fairly certain no one knew about his cracked skull. Maybe not his broken ribs either. So much had just happened. It was

all so confusing and…ah…his emotions were tidal waves, crashing over him, leaving him breathless.

“You have some serious explaining to do, little ghost,” said Feng Xin as they came to the top of the stairs.

“Do I?” San Lang said, and Xie Lian could hear his smirk from behind his mask. “And to whom do I owe answers? Certainly not you two disloyal wank stains.”

“Disloyal? What the hell?” Feng Xin tipped his cream-coloured mask up. Beneath, was a brightly handsome face, with a deep brow and dark eyes. Nearly unrecognisable, but Xie Lian could see the spark of rage in his eyes that could only ever belong to Feng Xin.

“You owe answers to His Highness.” Mu Qing’s voice was dampened behind his scowling mask. Had he chosen the mask to match his mood? Did he know his mask was scowling? “You lied. Or does honesty matter to ghosts?”

“Tut tut, General Xuan Zhen.” Gorgo’s lavender eyes took on a strange glint. “This is Ghost City, after all. You might consider minding your manners.”

Mu Qing narrowed his eyes at Gorgo. “Excuse me? Who even are you?”

Xie Lian’s ears were ringing and his jaw ached. The coppery taste of blood coated his tongue.

“Ah, that’s my boss, Mu Qing,” he rasped, and oh, how his throat hurt.

“Your Highness. Don’t talk,” Feng Xin said.

Xie Lian ignored him. He turned to the ghost in black standing next to Gorgo and nodded. “Hello, there.”

The ghost did not remove his woeful smiling mask. He bowed deeply to Xie Lian—so deeply that the back of Xie Lian's neck burned hot. "Your Royal Highness, this lowly one is Silent Moon. Any request, any at all, simply ask, and I will provide."

"Right," Mu Qing sneered, "but who actually *are* you? For all we know you could be working for Hua Cheng."

Silent Moon tensed. "I—" He took a deep breath and tried again. "I work—" The rest of his words came out garbled.

"Ha! Dragon got your tongue?" Gorgo waved his bony hand in the air. "Enough nonsense—never mind Silent Moon. His Highness is wounded, and we should not linger here. We are in Hua Cheng's territory, after all."

San Lang was strangely silent, his gaze flickering intermittently toward Xie Lian, as though he was expecting him to fall to pieces any moment.

Xie Lian's heart was in turmoil. So much had just happened…so much had yet to happen. He wasn't existing in one fixed point in time. He was spread like gruesome jelly over the centuries and into the future, grief and violence colouring his every moment, his every thought. What had happened, what had happened, ah, what would happen? It was all over. It hadn't yet begun. He was already dead, he was already dead.

Wu ming…

Xie Lian swallowed. "I'm fine, San Lang."

"Gege…" San Lang whined, but said nothing more.

They surfaced into the kitchen of a very busy Ghost City restaurant, all industrial steel and modern appliances. The chaos—the banging of pots, the shouting of cooks, the bright lights—was a jolt to the system. The air smelled heavily of blood and garlic, of onions and smoke. There was a giant vat over a flame, and within, was a sweating chicken the size of a horse, clucking contentedly as he peppered and salted his own glistening feathers.

“Order up!” shouted a ghost with no discernible features. He was essentially a round, grey blob wearing a chef’s hat. No legs. No arms. How did he manage to prepare food?

Gorgo led them through the busy kitchen and out onto the even busier streets of Ghost City.

On the street corner, Silent Moon bowed to Xie Lian once more. “I will leave you here, Your Royal Highness. I have business to attend to at Par—” His words caught. “I have business to attend to.”

Xie Lian frowned, the back of his neck prickling cold. He watched Silent Moon carefully. Waiting. Something felt off. Ah, but his head was pounding. He couldn’t think clearly.

“Very well. Thank you for your help, Silent Moon. Let me know if you hear any…any—” Gorgo’s words, too, abruptly stopped. Xie Lian was baffled. He’d never heard Gorgo so much as fumble a phrase, let alone at a loss for words. "Farewell then."

They took backstreet passageways and forbidden closes back to the bookshop, pausing only for Xie Lian to retch blood onto the cobbled streets. Mu Qing fretted, his attentions laced with hostility as Feng Xin cursed under his breath.

“I’m fine,” Xie Lian gasped as San Lang wiped blood from his mouth.

“Come along now, little gods. We mustn’t tarry.” Gorgo’s eyes darted wildly in the darkness of the alley. He wrung his hands, muttering under his breath.

Xie Lian rose shakily to his feet, braced on one side by San Lang, and on the other by Shi Qingxuan. In their female form, Xie Lian was of a height with them. It was comforting, in a way.

When they arrived back at the shop, they were all silent as Gorgo unlocked the door.

The bookshop was dark. Eerily quiet. Gorgo closed the door behind them, shop bells chiming, and locked it.

“What in the shit?” Feng Xin muttered. “What in the ever loving shit.”

Mu Qing removed his scowling mask and scowled. “This shop is a mirror image of the one you worked at in the Mortal Realm. Why am I not surprised.”

“This is the original, actually,” Gorgo said. “When I attempted to forge the bookshop in the Mortal Realm, it flipped itself. Not sure why. Oh well. The shop has as much of a soul as you or I. It orchestrated itself as it saw fit. I had little say.”

“A living breathing shop! Ha ha ha ha, how lucky you are to work in such a place, Your Highness!”

Gorgo’s eyes sparkled as he watched Shi Qingxuan with approval.

Xie Lian pulled off his mask; his vision collapsed around the edges, and his belly roiled. Sweat collected along his collar bones and trickled down his sides.

“Gege.” San Lang’s cool breath fanned the hairs on the top of his head. “I need to look at your injuries. I’m taking you upstairs.”

“I will be looking at his injuries,” Mu Qing said, arms crossed. “And you won’t be taking him anywhere without us.”

Feng Xin took off his mask and resumed his true form. “Your Highness, he’s already proven himself to be untrustworthy. We can’t leave you alone with him.”

Xie Lian tried to respond. He tried to make his mouth move around the syllables. But somewhere between the restaurant and arriving back at the bookshop, he’d drifted away, his thoughts muffled, his head packed with cotton gauze. He leaned heavily into San Lang’s touch, against his chilled skin—fire against ice. San Lang had no heartbeat now. Had he just never noticed before? Or had San Lang finally stopped pretending?

“San Lang,” was all he managed to say as his legs gave out from under him.

San Lang swept him up into his arms. “I’m here, Gege. I’m here.”

Feng Xin growled, taking a step toward them. “Give him to me—”

“If either of you two fuck ass punks lay one finger on him, I will end your miserable existence. The end.”

“Why have you inserted yourself into Xie Lian’s life? Why now? You must want something!” Mu Qing was incensed. Rarely did he allow hysteria to touch his tone, but he was very much out of his element. Very much out of his comfort zone. He didn’t do very well out of his comfort zone. “He’s been through enough!”

San Lang laughed without mirth. “And how have you contributed to that, hmn? Only checking in every few hundred years, living in luxury while His Highness had nothing? When Hua Cheng was hot on your trail, you both hid away in the Heavens. His Highness never had that luxury.”

“We didn’t hide away in the Heav—”

“And what about before?” San Lang interrupted. “After the fall of Xianle? When Bai Wuxiang stalked His Highness, where were you then?”

Xie Lian cringed, his heart throbbing. Ah, Hua Cheng had unearthed quite a few past traumas, hadn’t he. Now everything was out in the open. He'd really rather not discuss any of it. He'd rather...he'd rather...

“What the hell do you want with him?” Feng Xin growled, taking a step forward, fists straining at his sides.

“I’m fattening him up for a nice meal. Nothing tastier than a tender little god such as His Highness.”

“YOU!” Mu Qing and Feng Xin shouted in unison.

Shi Qingxuan dissolved into nervous laughter “Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Your Highness! This San Lang of yours is quite the character!”

“San Lang”—Xie Lian’s throat blistered, his head throbbing—“they don’t…ah…I mean, they aren’t used to your humour.”

“As you say, Gege. This wretched knave apologises. That was in poor taste.” San Lang turned and carried him up the creaky stairs, leaving Mu Qing, Feng Xin, Shi Qingxuan, and Gorgo behind. Xie Lian couldn’t help but rest his head against San Lang’s strong chest—breathe in his floral and smoke scent.

“Your Highness!” Feng Xin’s boots thudded on the steps behind them. “Why are you still calling him San Lang! You can’t trust him! He’s a ghost—a lying ghost at that!”

“Cry about it,” San Lang tossed over his shoulder, fury radiating off of him in waves.

San Lang kicked open their bedroom door, and Feng Xin followed them in, lingering in the doorway. Xie Lian gasped for breath as San Lang laid him on the bed, sharp bolts of pain exploding behind his eyes. Had his broken rib gone through his lung?

The red haze of Ghost City lantern light flickered along the walls. Beyond the windows, Ghost City raged—shouting, laughter, firecrackers—the sounds blending with his wild emotions, colouring his mindscape crimson red.

Hua Cheng's colour.

Wu Ming's colour.

Hong'er.

Red.

Xie Lian moaned as the back of his head touched the pillow.

"Gege? Where does it hurt? Tell me!"

Mu Qing appeared in the doorway behind Feng Xin. He procured a blue potion bottle from his sleeve and brushed past San Lang. "Move."

To his credit, San Lang listened without protest.

Mu Qing hesitated for a moment, a clear look of distaste on his pretty face, but after a moment, he sat on the bed next to Xie Lian.

“Hold still.” Mu Qing furrowed his elegant brow. He flattened his palms and hovered them over Xie Lian’s body, scanning for injuries, muttering to himself. “You idiot. Your skull is cracked. Three broken ribs. Perforated lung. Don’t get me started on the damage to your throat.”

San Lang sucked in a breath.

“Why are you so pissed at him!” Feng Xin paced the length of the room. He picked up a mug that said ‘none of your emails are finding me well’ across the front. He frowned and set the mug down. “This isn’t his fault!”

Mu Qing scoffed. “No? So you don’t think he willingly handed himself over to Hua Cheng to save his precious, lying San Lang? Did you happen to see him fighting back even a little?”

Xie Lian’s cheeks burned, and he turned his head away, shivering. For a horrifying moment, he thought he might vomit all over the bed.

“How are you even still conscious?” Mu Qing muttered as he unstoppered the potion bottle, trying to hide the way his hands shook. “This will hurt. But then you’ll probably sleep.”

Xie Lian watched the light dance across the walls, carefully avoiding eye contact with everyone in the room. He felt too vulnerable. Too exposed. Tears pricked behind his eyes, and he blinked them away. “It’s okay, Mu Qing. I’m okay.”

“Right. You always say you’re okay. Always fine. Were you fine when Bai Wuxiang was torturing you? When you were alone all those y—” His voice cracked. “Never mind. You’re an idiot.”

“Mu Qing,” Xie Lian rasped.

“Stop. Talking.”

The potion bottle glowed, and a vibrant blue smoke poured out, washing over Xie Lian's body and concentrating around his wounds. Xie Lian's ribs snapped back into place, and he gasped, squeezing his eyes shut as the back of his skull melded back together. It was agony. Xie Lian saw white, and his body convulsed. When it was all over, he felt heavy. So tired. So, so tired. But in the absence of pain, he was almost euphoric.

Ruoye shivered and unspooled from around his head. The white silk was stained a deep red.

Mu Qing jumped back, crashing into Feng Xin. His eyes were wide as he watched Ruoye wrap around Xie Lian's wrist.

"Your Highness," Feng Xin whispered. He didn't seem to notice that he was still tightly grasping Mu Qing's shoulders. "Is it…was Hua Cheng…did…is it true? About…about the King and Queen? And your silk band…thing?"

Xie Lian swallowed. Terrible and dark emotions threatened to drag him to the abyss. "Ah…ah…" His throat ached. Suddenly all he could see was his mother's smile. He could taste the last meal she cooked on his tongue, tinged with coppery blood.

"You two. Leave." San Lang's eyes glowing softly. A bright stripe of blood was smeared across his pale cheek, and his raven hair was in chaos. He was so tall. Taller than Feng Xin by quite a bit. He looked deadly. Deadlier that Hua Cheng.

"Not until we have answers," Mu Qing said, crossing his arms. There was a slight waver to his voice, and his gaze darted uncertainly to Feng Xin.

"Thank you, Mu Qing. Feng Xin," Xie Lian whispered. "Ah…I…please, maybe it's better we try and talk tomorrow. I'm safe here with San Lang."

"But—"

“I said leave,” San Lang snarled.

Xie Lian closed his eyes and released a shaky breath. Two sets of heavy footsteps dragged across the floor and the door closed.

“San Lang.” Xie Lian threaded their fingers together. San Lang’s fingers were so cold. So strong.

“Gege…”

“San Lang, a lot has just happened, and it’s all very confusing. I…I need…can we talk tomorrow?”

San Lang was quiet for a long moment. Xie Lian’s eyes fluttered open. San Lang was watching him, a devastated look in his eyes.

“Of course, Gege. Would you like—” He paused. “I would understand if you wanted me to go.”

“No! No. Please stay? Please stay, San Lang?"

San Lang nodded. Carefully, so as not to jostle Xie Lian, he crawled into the bed next to him. He took Xie Lian’s hand once more in his own, and Xie Lian sighed as warm spiritual energy washed over him, taking away his pain.

“Sleep, Gege. You need your rest.”

Xie Lian closed his eyes, and soon, he drifted into the blackness of a troubled sleep.

***

Was this really happening?

Granules of dirt embedded beneath his fingernails, earth compacted down his throat. Pressure built in his ears. Humming. Vibrations through his bones—through the earth surrounding his coffin, shaking loose reams of centipedes and spiders.

The walls of the coffin pressed in on him, invisible but weighty. It had been 100 years since he'd taken a breath, and his lungs were dried husks, collapsed and dusty. His moments of life were fleeting—bright hot pain and suffocation interrupted by dragging hours of sucking death.

And he was alone, alone, alone.

Darkness again, then a spark of consciousness as his heart slipped over a new beat and jerked violently around the dowel.

"Gege. Gege, I would understand if you wanted me to go."

The humming bothered his ears—ached between his teeth—but it was fine. Only seconds remained. He would be dead again in a moment. Xie Lian's heart shuddered and thrashed. Hot blood flooded beneath his red-lacquered robes, pooling along his clavicle—along the pale pillar of his neck. Drops of blood shivered and jumped at his pulse points.

Xie Lian turned his head.

San Lang lay beside him in the coffin, his fire and shadow eyes glinting in the darkness.

"Gege, it is a heavy curse." His mouth hung open. His eyes were vacant. Empty and useeing.

There was a thudding on the roof of the coffin. Crack. Thud. Crack. San Lang stared at him still, his lips moving without sound.

Thud. Crack. Thud.

The lid lifted, and red moonlight flooded the coffin. Bai Wuxiang looked down on them.

“Your Highness,” Bai Wuxiang purred from behind the half-smiling, half-crying mask. “I am not who I was, nor will I ever be.”

Xie Lian gasped awake, shouting nonsense to the dark room. His arms flailed, and he clawed at his face, choking on bile and blood.

Strong arms wrapped around him, pinning his wrists to his sides. He tried to scream, but it came out as a gurgling sob.

“Gege, Gege, shhhh, it was a dream. Gege, you’re safe. You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

The room was dark. Their mug collection lined the windowsill. Their masks, one sparkling peach, the other silver and red, lay on the table, bathed in red lantern light. The light on the microwave blinked.

He was in Ghost City. Above Gorgo’s bookshop. San Lang was here, and he was safe. He wasn’t in the coffin. He’d been released nearly 2000 years ago. Someone had let him out. He wasn’t in the coffin. He wasn’t in the coffin.

“I’m not in the coffin. I’m not…I’m…”

San Lang rocked him back and forth, running his long fingers through his matted hair. “You’re safe, Gege. You’re not in the coffin. I’ve got you. Shhh.”

Xie Lian’s breathing began to slow, his racing heart began to slow. “I’m not…ah..aha.... San Lang. San Lang, so sorry. I…”

“Shhh, Gege.”

Xie Lian slumped in San Lang’s arms, his body convulsing with shivers. His cheeks were wet with tears. An agonising sob wrenched from his chest, and San Lang held him tighter—almost too tight, but it was what he needed. He couldn’t hold back any longer, and he wept, gasping for breath, mouth open in a silent howl.

San Lang continued to rock him until his sobbing quieted. Xie Lian stared blankly ahead.

“Would Gege like to try to go back to sleep.”

Xie Lian shook his head, burrowing further into San Lang’s arms. “I don’t think I can. I don’t think I can sleep anymore.”

“Is Gege hungry?”

Xie Lian shook his head once more. His belly roiled and his skin prickled cold with sweat.

“Gege had quite the shock tonight. Did he know who his Wu Ming was beneath the mask? It seemed Gege recognized him.”

Xie’s swallowed, listening intently to the silence in San Lang’s chest. No heartbeat. No heartbeat. Like Wu Ming. San Lang was dead like Wu Ming. How had he died? Why did Xie Lian suddenly have the suspicion that San Lang’s death, too, was his fault. It was all his fault.

“En. I knew him.” Xie Lian’s voice was still scratchy, despite Mu Qing’s medicine. It hurt a little to talk, but his emotions were swelling up inside him. When he was in San Lang’s arms, he felt it all. Everything. There was no hiding from the past. There was no hiding from his traumas. He felt it all, bubbling up inside him. “Back when I was still…ah…when I was still the Crowned Prince of Xianle, during the God-Pleasing Festival’s parade, a boy fell from the city towers, and I caught him. That same boy, born under the Star of Solitude, was eventually enlisted to the Xianle army and died in the war. That boy…that boy was Hua Cheng. I see now why he wants revenge. He died because of me. Twice. It doesn’t matter how sorry I am. It doesn’t matter what I say or do. There’s no taking that back. He has every right…to…to…”

“Gege, Gege, shhhh. It’s not your fault. It couldn’t have been your fault. Your heart is so pure. You are so good. You did the best you could under the circumstances.”

Xie Lian shook his head. “But I’m not good. I was…I was selfish and cruel. I’m not who you think I am, San Lang. I’m not good.”

“But you are, Your Highness. Your very existence in the world is hope. You saved that boy. You saved him, Gege.”

Xie Lian shook his head, his throat tight.

They sat that way for a while, rocking back and forth in silence.

Finally, Xie Lian broke the silence. “San Lang was a match for Hua Cheng. A very impressive fighter indeed. I’ve rarely seen such martial prowess.” He didn’t mention that much of San Lang’s footwork reminded him of the Xianle style.

San Lang said nothing, but his fingers smoothed Xie Lian’s hair gently.

“San Lang must be a very old ghost, then?”

“I—”

“San Lang?”

“I…I can’t…” San Lang choked on his words. “Gege…”

Xie Lian turned in his arms to see his face. San Lang was pale. His lips were white, his thick dark lashes quivering.

“San Lang doesn’t have to answer if he’s uncomfortable.”

“I…I never wanted to lie to Gege. Not ever.”

“Mmn. I’m sure San Lang had a reason for keeping his secrets.”

Still, San Lang was silent.

“May I ask then, San Lang, did you take the job in Gorgo’s bookshop because you knew who I was?” He watched San Lang carefully, his bones thrumming with anxiety. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

San Lang opened his mouth, but just like in his dreams, no words followed.

“Is there something you can’t tell me, San Lang?”

San Lang’s eyes widened, but still he didn’t answer.

“San Lang?”

“Gege, I…” He released a slow breath he most certainly didn’t need. “I would never hurt you. I would never lie or keep anything from you if I could help it.”

If he could help it.

Xie Lian narrowed his gaze, a strange feeling of foreboding settling in his heart. Why wouldn’t San Lang answer him?

“Gege, do you trust me?”

“I do.” And he did. More than he’d ever trusted anyone. More than he trusted himself. Perhaps it was foolish, but he couldn’t help the way he felt.

“Then believe me, Your Highness, I would never do anything to hurt you. I will protect you. I won’t let that crazy fuck hurt you again.”

Xie Lian sat in stunned silence.

Dawn bloomed, hazy red. It filled the quiet corners of their little room. San Lang’s crimson eye glowed.

They rose quietly in the stillness of the morning, the wide-plank wood floors creaking beneath their feet. San Lang prepared espresso in their makeshift kitchen, while Xie Lian showered. He watched rivers of blood circle the drain, his thoughts in chaos. A sense of foreboding had awakened in his heart. Wu Ming. Wu Ming.

Something felt wrong. Something felt off.

He couldn’t stop thinking about the red jewelled eye of E-Ming—he couldn’t stop thinking about how much Wu Ming had looked and sounded like San Lang.

Once he’d towelled off and wrapped his wet hair up in a top bun, he dressed in a long-sleeved white henley and a pair of soft black barrel jeans San Lang had bought him, tying an old piece of white fabric around the cursed shackle on his neck

He was rinsing Ruoye in the sink, water splashing everywhere as the white silk writhed and shivered, when there was a knock at the door.

San Lang peeked around the corner of the washroom. “Gege, Gege, should I tell them to fuck off?”

Xie Lian sighed, wringing out the dripping, quivering silk band and hanging over the shower curtain.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing stood at the door. They were both pale, dark smudges carved beneath their eyes.

“Your Highness,” Feng Xin said. “Jun Wu wants to meet you today. In the Mortal Realm.”

Xie Lian’s heart stuttered. His mouth went dry.

“Did you tell him where His Highness was hiding?” San Lang’s eyes flashed bright. Too bright. His rage was palpable.

“What the fuck does it matter? He’s the Heavenly Emperor. He has a right to know where His Highness is. Mind your own fucking business.”

Xie Lian took a slow breath to calm his nerves. Dread solidified in his chest, heavy and dense. “Fine. Where does he want to meet?”

“Tell him to come to Ghost City,” San Lang said.

Xie Lian turned to him in surprise.

“Why should Gege have to travel again when he is still so hurt? Jun Wu can come to Gege.”

For the life of him, Xie Lian could not understand the wild and terrifying grin on San Lang’s face.

Need. Touch. Heat.

Chapter Notes

May I say how deeply touched I am by your wonderful, kind, inspiring comments? As any creative, I am often crippled by imposter syndrome, but you fine folk always pull me right back out again. And sometimes your comments make me belly laugh! Especially the ones raging about Jun Wu! Ahhh I love you guys! So so so much! And the heckling? Please. It makes me all warm and fuzzy inside. The heckling is a balm for my soul. Ha ha. Okay. Well, here's the chapter. It's...um....

I would love to share two authors I am OBSESSED with right now. Of course there are so many wonderful authors on here. I have to read at the speed of light to enjoy them all!

Dee_Plume's Body Is The Abyss took me on an emotional journey I may never return from. And cute, feral, wild calamity Xie Lian? Yes please!

The other is cl0ud_calico_k0i's soul-crushing, poetic fic, Pawns of the Divine. Just shivery and dark—pre-first banishment beauty, with Hong'er at Xie Lian's side in battle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Raindrops cascaded down, sploshing in a heavy torrent at his feet, and Ghost City winked in the red-lantern glow. Leafy boats, rotten and crisped at the edges, swirled in the gutters, and the cobblestones glistened with slicks of oil. Mist curled against the blackened buildings, rubbing back and forth like a demonic cat.

Xie Lian stood before the Gambler’s Den. He’d seen it several times now, but only from a distance. Up this close, it pulsated with evil. With chaos. With power. He closed his eyes and swallowed. The din of the rain—the din of howling ghosts—fell away, and the hum of the Gambler’s Den resonated through his bones.

Cold raindrops slid down the knobs of his spine, and he shivered, conceding to the waves of sinister energy. They washed over him, leaving his limbs tingling, his thoughts muffled. Something truly evil lurked within the Gambler’s Den. A chill went through and through him, and the air was close—as if he was buried six feet under, choking on mouthfuls of gravedirt. The wind whistled through his ribs, and his heart throbbed around a phantom dowel.

When he opened his eyes, the Gambler's Den yawned before him.

Xie Lian hadn't wanted to admit it to himself. He hadn't wanted to admit that Hua Cheng was unreachable, his heart irreparably blackened with hate and malice. He'd held on to hope that his Wu Ming, his beautiful ghost soldier, his sweet Hong Hong'er, had just been buried beneath his rage and anguish—that if Xie Lian held out his hand, Hua Cheng might take it—that he was only waiting for Xie Lian to catch him in his arms as he had during the God Pleasing Parade.

Xie Lian had hoped he could reach him. Pull him through the darkness.

That hope had faded, and the long tail of grief brushed along his spine.

He took a shuddering breath.

"Your Highness, His Majesty is waiting for you inside," Feng Xin said. His jaw tightened as he read the placards hanging on either side of the entrance. The couplets that read "Money over life", "Gains over shame", "Ha ha ha". Xie Lian couldn't help but enjoy the chaotic evil and mischief of the placards. So much character. A part of him suspected these were done by his Wu Ming, and a bittersweet smile touched his face.

Mu Qing shifted awkwardly behind them. "This makes no sense. Why did his Majesty Choose the Gambler's Den of all places? Hua Cheng could be in there right now. Or he could show up at any minute. I heard he's in the city now."

"Who cares?" Feng Xin growled. "It's His Majesty. He can protect His Highness against Hua Cheng. He probably thinks it will be fine if they're in disguise. Hiding in plain sight."

Mu Qing scoffed behind his scowling mask. "It still makes no sense. Where is your creepy friend, anyway? Usually he's stuck to you like a leech."

“San Lang is working in the shop tonight. He’d just be waiting out here in the rain anyway.”

“I have a bad feeling about this. Feels like your San Lang is setting you up to be ripped apart. You can’t trust ghosts.” Mu Qing turned to Feng Xin. “We should go in with him.”

Feng Xin was quiet, which Xie Lian suspected meant he agreed.

“It’s fine. San Lang would never hurt me. And Gorgo spelled my mask, see? No need to come with me,” Xie Lian said with an awkward laugh. “I’m completely unrecognisable. Unnoticeable. Not even Hua Cheng can see that I’m mortal, let alone a god.”

“A banished god,” Mu Qing said, but then stiffened.

“A banished god.” Xie Lian nodded. “Indeed. Even less aura to worry about then, right? If you join me, we will only attract further attention.”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Mu Qing repeated, though mostly to himself this time.

“Ah, Mu Qing, you have mentioned that already. If you feel this is too much, kindly turn around.”

“We won’t be turning around, Your Highness,” Feng Xin said, his fists balled at his sides. “We will be right here waiting for you.”

“My gratitude.” Xie Lian steeled himself, and without a moment’s pause, followed the stairs up to the grand entrance of the Gambler’s Den.

The Gambler’s Den was chaos embodied. It was the heart of Ghost City—the mania, the colours, were concentrated here, and ghosts of every size, shape, and ilk shouted and drank, gambling and laughing, placing horrible bets and weeping.

The sights and smells took Xie Lian's breath away, and he fought the urge to cover his ears against the cacophony. It was all too much…too much and not enough. Sweat dampened his hairline, and he vibrated with nervous energy as he pushed through the crowd.

The architecture and design of the hall was surprisingly elegant, despite the large too-bright red masks that hung from the ceiling, despite the gaudy golden steps leading to a dais veiled by a red silk curtain. Despite the shining floors dappled with pools of blood.

The dais behind the red silk curtain was empty, and the table at the base of the golden steps was not in use. Hua Cheng was not in residence. Xie Lian should have felt relieved, but his anxiety only notched up as he searched for the Emperor.

Two large ghosts in uniform dragged a screaming patron toward the front doors, a trail of blood smearing the floor behind him. The patron howled in a language Xie Lian didn't recognise. Behind them, one of the croupiers was stuffing a severed leg into a silk bag and wiping a bloodied axe on her pant leg.

A table of ghosts, all with long slender necks, whispered to one another, casting nervous glances around the hall. One ghost, who was mostly moustache, groped one of the waitresses as she passed by, and she turned and slit his throat with her bright purple claws. As the moustached ghost lay on the floor bleeding out, a creepy smile stretched across his face.

The chaos seemed to only intensify around him, all rippling emotion and snarling entropy, but with a whimsical and playful edge. This was the heart of Ghost City. The soul.

Xie Lian's heart hammered, and dread curled like a burnt match in his belly as he searched the crowd—dread, he realised, that had little to do with Hua Cheng or his spectacular Gambler's Den.

Ah, but why was he feeling such dread? This was Jun Wu, the Heavenly Emperor. He had once been like a father, a mentor, to Xie Lian—before Xie Lian had destroyed everything by defying the heavens and burning his kingdom to ash with his selfish impulsivity.

He tried not to think about the last time he'd seen Jun Wu.

He tried not to think about the last time Jun Wu had seen him, skeletal and hanging on to life by his cursed shackle, skin sloughing off his brittle and garish body, his eyes sunken, sores pussing and oozing old blood. He remembered very little from that time—only the soft, hazy whites and golds of Jun Wu's palace. So bright after 100 years of only darkness.

And the pain. He remembered the pain in his reanimated body, his skin so thin you could see his heart sputtering within.

It had taken him months to come back to himself, to realise he was out and no longer a corpse in a coffin. If Jun Wu hadn't answered his prayers, would he still be down there? He should be grateful. Ah, ah, he should be grateful. But the wrongness of it all…he couldn't understand the depths of his own heart. He hid so much from himself. He always had.

A fight broke out at one of the gambling tables. Xie Lian stood on the tips of his toes to see what was happening.

"Xianle." The voice was familiar. It came from directly behind him.

Goosebumps covered Xie Lian's pale skin, and he turned.

A man stood behind him, tall and handsome, but unrecognisable. He wore no mask and had no aura—not of ghost or god or mortal. His silvery hair was swept across his pale brow, and his blue eyes shone.

"Majesty?" Xie Lian whispered.

Jun Wu smiled placidly, and when he did, his eyes glinted in a familiar way. Xie Lian would always recognise that glint. He'd seen it in his darkest hours, on his knees before the Heavenly Court as his banishment was handed down; as he crossed blades with the Emperor in a vicious dance across the Heavenly Capital after his second ascension; as his body knitted

itself back together, Jun Wu spoon feeding him mouthfuls of bland broth. It had been nearly 2000 years, but he would not forget.

It was strange to see the Heavenly Emperor with such a diminished aura. He'd never seen Jun Wu in anything other than his grand robes and armour, regal and stately—the most powerful being on earth. Xie Lian had always known Jun Wu was a talented shape shifter, but he'd never actually seen it.

"Come, Xianle. I've secured us a table where we can observe the fray."

"How did you know it was me?" Xie Lian asked, his voice strained.

"General Nan Yang mentioned you would be wearing a sparkling peach mask. A unique choice. It suits you. I took the liberty of ordering refreshments."

Jun Wu led him to one of the tables beneath the rain-jewelled windows. It was a communal table, long and slender, and many ghosts were laughing, talking, sharing platters of rather questionable food. Red lanterns hung low over the tables, casting a crimson glow that made Xie Lian feel a little sleepy.

"Xianle, Xianle. How wonderful it is to see you again. I am only sorry about the circumstances. Must I ask why it has taken you so long to meet with me?"

"Majesty? I thought you were busy cultivating in the Mortal Realm."

They sat across from one another at the end of the long table, and immediately two colourful blue drinks were set before them by a kind-eyed ghost waitress.

Xie Lian smiled. Jun Wu did not glance her way; his gaze remained fixed on Xie Lian.

“I have been waiting for you to ask for my help. I’m not surprised you’ve finally reached out. Things have certainly come to a head now. I understand you and Hua Cheng met face to face for the first time.”

Xie Lian could only nod, not wanting to correct His Majesty that he had not, in fact, reached out. A strangeness had settled in him. His heart raced, and his skin prickled, but he could not find the source of his anxiety.

“I’m only glad you are all right. Hua Cheng is a demon out of hell—a sadistic monster, bent on revenge.” Jun Wu sighed, glancing around the room. “You have chosen a very interesting place to hide this time. Tell me, Xianle, what has brought you to Ghost City?”

“Ah, a strange series of events.” He laughed. “I met a very interesting man, who turned out to be a ghost. We came together.”

Something flickered in Jun Wu’s eyes. “I see. And you’re certain you can trust this ghost?”

“I trust him with my life.”

“Xianle. You never learn, do you.” Jun Wu sighed heavily with an indulgent smile. “And do you know how Hua Cheng has been locating you?”

Behind his mask, Xie Lian bit his lip so hard it bled. “I don’t.”

Jun Wu’s expression remained placid. “Too often Hua Cheng knows exactly what he shouldn’t. Which boundaries to push. Which weakness to exploit. He seems to know everything. It’s uncanny. Secrets fall from Heaven directly into Hua Cheng’s lap. I am certain he has many spies. Be very careful to whom you speak, Xianle. Very careful indeed.”

“I am aware. For many years, I spoke to no one. I had no contact with any Heavenly Officials, nor did I keep close confidence with any mortals or ghosts.”

“You did not speak even to Xuan Zhen or Nan Yang?”

“No. We have only recently reconnected.”

“I won, I won!” a ghost wrapped in white gauze crowed, clawing at the chips on the table. Their voice was like metal on glass. Down the table, a pretty ghost with long pink hair dumped her drink over a tiger spirit’s head. He sputtered and growled, but didn’t chase after her as she stalked out of the Gambler’s Den.

“Majesty, may I ask, why have you chosen to meet here in the Gambler’s Den to meet?”

Jun Wu smiled. “Was it not you who chose Ghost City, Xianle?”

“Ah. Indeed it was.”

“Mnm. And I must admit, I was curious. I have been hearing tales of the infamous Gambler’s Den for centuries but have never found occasion to visit. It lives up to its reputation.”

Xie Lian needed something to do with his hands. He tipped his mask up enough to take a sip of the vibrant blue drink. It was sweet. Citrus and mango. Calm washed over him, fizzing in his veins. What was this drink? It was nice! He drank the rest in one gulp.

Jun Wu, too, sipped his drink. He made a sour face and glared after the waitress. For a moment, Xie Lian thought he would spit it back into the glass. “You’ve certainly acclimated quickly to Ghost City, Xianle.”

“Hmn. I actually quite like it here. It’s a very unique city. Darkly beautiful.”

“And does your love of Ghost City have anything to do with this new friend you mentioned?”

Xie Lian could barely manage a smile.

“Xianle, Xianle. I know friends are rare treasures for you. But be careful. You mustn’t trust just anyone. You have been betrayed time and time again, but you never learn.”

Xie Lian nodded. He wanted to leave. He wanted to go back to San Lang. He wanted to leave. The texture of Jun Wu’s voice was raising the tiny hairs on the back of his neck

The waitress returned with another blue drink for Xie Lian. She smiled warmly at him as she took his empty glass away, ignoring Jun Wu completely.

Jun Wu absently fiddled with the stem of his half-empty glass, watching Xie Lian. “You look like you’ve been having a hard time, Xianle. Have you been eating enough? Taking care of yourself? You have always had a tendency to get yourself into…dire situations.”

Xie Lian’s stomach turned. Memories of Jun Wu helping him walk, helping him learn to speak again, helping him find his way back to the world of the living, flooded his mind like acid. Everything had been gleaming white and sterile. Too bright. At first he’d felt only gratitude. Only relief. But as the months wore on, he’d felt just as trapped as he had in the coffin. Sometimes it felt as though he was still down there.

He could never understand his own feelings about that time. He thought he had processed those moments. He thought he’d moved on. He wasn’t in the coffin. He wasn’t sequestered in Heaven. He was in Hua Cheng’s lively and vivid Gambler’s Den. He was in Ghost City, and San Lang was waiting for him.

“En, Majesty. Of course.”

“Good.” Jun Wu downed the rest of his drink with another sour look and a shudder. “Let us talk then. What shall we do to foil Hua Cheng? Would you like to return to the Heavens as my deputy? That can certainly be arranged. You will have to leave your ghost friend behind. No more contact.”

Suddenly, the Gambler's Den fell silent, like a roaring fire doused with powder. The air hummed with electricity, and the lanterns flickered. Screams broke out, mixed with cheers, as silver butterflies burst throughout the hall, casting a strange, flickering light. One butterfly flew in a circle around Xie Lian and then Jun Wu, then vanished.

Bells chimed in a steady rhythm. Xie Lian held his breath, panic closing his throat. Slowly, he turned in his seat. Through the parted crowd, was the breathtaking figure of Hua Cheng.

He looked exactly as he had when Xie Lian had faced him in the Mortal Realm, and yet completely different. The same incredible height and lean build, the same long, elegant fingers, nails painted matte black. His wild mane of raven feather hair hung in waves down his back, and a single black braid, decorated with a red coral bead, rested against the column of his pale neck. His ears were pointed, and a single black patch covered his right eye. He was impossibly beautiful. Ethereal. Devastating beauty. These things were all the same.

But his energy was completely different. He seemed mischievous. Powerful, but playful. Warmth shone in his single dark eye. Warmth, and something else—something like worship. Xie Lian couldn't look away. He also noticed that the ghost king, while accompanied by his death spirit butterflies, did not carry E-Ming. The weeping scimitar was absent from his hip.

"LORD CHENGZHU HAS RETURNED!" someone shouted with joy, and the hall erupted in cheers, some thousand ghosts screaming and pushing to get a better look at the supreme ghost king. Some dropped to their knees, kowtowing. Some swooned. Some ran for the doors, hiding their faces as they fled.

"YOUR 'OL LORDSHIP, WELCOME BACK, WELCOME BACK!"

"ALL BOW BEFORE CRISMON RAIN!"

The waitress who had been serving them paused at their table. "Young master, you are in for a treat tonight!" She sighed, a little breathless. "Our lord has arrived. Isn't he gorgeous?"

Xie Lian's heart thrashed against his ribcage as Hua Cheng's gaze swept the room. His onyx eye caught on Xie Lian. Xie Lian stopped breathing, stopped moving. He could only stare back, frozen. But his heart slowed, and calm washed over him. He took a slow breath, lifting his chin.

Hua Cheng held his gaze for a moment longer before moving on.

"As you were," the ghost king said in a voice like velvet and darkness, so deep and rich, it sent a shiver down Xie Lian's spine, and the room erupted once more. Hua Cheng turned his back on Xie Lian and Jun Wu. He climbed the golden steps and disappeared behind the shimmered red curtain.

"Come along, Xianle. It's best we leave. Not even I dare stand against Hua Cheng in his own territory."

Xie Lian's mouth was dry. He nodded, casting one last glance up at the red curtain.

"Hmn," Jun Wu said, rising to his feet. He threw Ghost City currency on the table to pay for the drinks. He wore an odd expression, an ugly gleam in his eyes. He rested a heavy hand on Xie Lian's shoulder as he guided him through the crowd.

The killing intent in the room surged, and darkness crowded the corners of Xie Lian's vision. He could feel Hua Cheng's eyes on him, and stifled the instinct to run. Ghosts moaned and growled, some throwing themselves beneath the gambling tables, as the killing intent expanded and crushed. A moment later, the suffocating energy receded, and the room calmed. Jun Wu tightened his grip as he threw open the doors to the Gambler's Den.

In the chilled streets, Xie Lian gasped for breath, sweat pouring down his face beneath his mask. Feng Xin and Mu Qing were at his side in an instant, Jun Wu still gripping his shoulder.

"Your Highness!" they shouted in unison.

“Somethings…something’s wrong,” Xie Lian muttered. His thoughts swirled like mist. He couldn’t hold on to any of them. “That wasn’t…that wasn’t Wu Ming, er, Hua Cheng. Or, that wasn’t the ghost I encountered in the mortal realm.”

“Xianle.” Jun Wu squeezed his shoulder. “You’ve had a shock. It was a mistake to take you there.”

Mu Qing glanced up at the Emperor, and Xie Lian thought he caught a flicker of rage in the eyes behind his mask.

“Your Highness, let’s get you home. You need rest,” Feng Xin said, his voice tight with worry.

“You don’t understand!” Panic rose inside Xie Lian, hot and liquid. Hi Wu Ming…his Wu Ming, ah, but something like hope bloomed in his heart. No. No, he shouldn’t hope. He needed to clear his thoughts. “Something is wrong! That wasn’t the same ghost. Hua Cheng saw me, just now. He looked right at me, and he turned away. I think…I think—”

“Crimson Rain thankfully could not see through your disguise. I care not to think of what would have happened if he had noticed you.”

“He did see me. He saw right through my mask. I know he did.”

Mu Qing and Feng Xin were quiet, their shoulders tense. Neither of them said a word.

“Xianle. Get a hold of yourself. That was very much the Crimson Rain Sought Flower. Did you not see the accompanying wraith butterflies? You are distraught.”

“The butterflies weren’t with him in the Mortal Realm. He had the demonic scimitar, E-Ming, but no butterflies. And when he wielded the scimitar…it seemed…ah…it seemed as though it

was not loyal to him.”

The rain pounded the cobblestones around them, glittering like diamonds. The smell of cooking oil and blood filled the air.

Jun Wu sighed. “What a mess. Xianle. Come with me back to the Heavens for now, and we can discuss this further. Crimson Rain—”

“Gege!”

Xie Lian spun on his heels in the direction of the call. San Lang stood at the top of the Gambler’s Den steps. He wasn’t wearing his mask, and the red glow of Ghost City reflected in his crimson eye. He looked pale. Deathly so. And with his hair slipping out of its high ponytail, he looked more than a little like Hua Cheng.

“San Lang!” Xie Lian cried, as though it had been years since they’d parted rather than hours.

In an instant, he was down the steps and pulling Xie Lian into a bone-crushing hug, lifting him off his feet and swinging him side to side.

“Gege, Gege, Gege, I’m here!” He shook as he held Xie Lian tight, and Xie Lian squeezed back in understanding. “Gege, I was looking for you in the Gambler’s Den.”

“San Lang, I—” Xie Lian’s voice cracked as San Lang set him back to his feet. Irrational and overwhelming relief overcame him, thawing his frozen limbs. He was practically giddy to be in San Lang’s arms again. When had he become so dramatic?

In that moment, San Lang glanced over Xie Lian’s head, and the warmth in his eyes dimmed. He locked eyes with Jun Wu. While both kept indifferent expressions, the air was charged with something electric. Xie Lian suddenly felt a bit nervous, and he laughed.

“Ah, San Lang. We should get out of the rain. You aren’t even wearing a coat. You’ll catch cold.”

“Ghost don’t get cold, Gege. No need to worry for this San Lang.” He kissed the top of Xie Lian’s head, and both Muy Qing and Feng Xin sputtered. “C’mon, Gege. Let’s go.”

He took Xie Lian’s hand and pulled him away with a little more force than usual, but Xie Lian wasn’t about to complain. He wanted to go home. He needed to be away from here, to think…

“Hey!” Mu Qing yelled, catching up to them at the end of the street, Feng Xin behind him, boots splashing through puddles. “Jun Wu wants to take you to Heaven! He said he would appoint you as one of his deputies! Xie Lian! Where do you think you’re going?”

“Tell the Emperor to take a good fuck to himself.” San Lang’s eyes glowed with rage. He didn’t spare the generals a glance. Xie Lian didn’t even bother scolding him. All he wanted was to get away. Get far away. His instincts were screaming for him to run.

When Xie Lian glanced behind him, both Mu Qing and Feng Xin stood in the middle of the street watching after them with grim expressions.

They continued at their breakneck pace, rounding corners, passing through tunnels, and finally pausing under the awning of the same restaurant they’d eaten at their first night in Ghost City. Candles guttered in the windows, and the red lanterns bobbed. The tables outside were pebbled with rain.

“Gege is all wet,” San Lang whispered, tucking a sodden lock of hair behind his ear.

“San Lang. Something is…” He swallowed, taking deep, slow breaths to calm his racing heart. “Hua Cheng was in the Gambler’s Den.”

Something flickered in San Lang’s eye, but it was gone before Xie Lian could identify it.

“San Lang, he wasn’t the same. He wasn’t the same person that I met in the Mortal Realm. I…I can’t explain why, but I just know. He saw me. And he did nothing. And he just seemed…”

“Yes, Gege? How did he seem?” San Lang’s raven hair was plastered to his neck, his insanely long lashes speared with rain. He was so beautiful. So painfully beautiful.

“He seemed like…Wu Ming.”

San Lang closed his eyes. He was quiet for so long, Xie Lian began to think he wouldn’t speak. “Don’t worry, Gege. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“I want to go back. To the Gambler’s Den. I want to speak to Hua Cheng. I believe he is…ah ha ha ha I know this sounds crazy, but I believe he is the real Wu Ming. My Wu Ming.”

San Lang nodded. “How was your meeting with Jun Wu?”

Xie Lian shivered again, and San Lang ran his hands up and down the lengths of his arms. “Ah. I…” He paused for a moment, attempting to catalogue the tumult of emotions within. “I am glad to be back with my San Lang.”

“Your San Lang,” he whispered.

“En.”

“Gege, the other night, I—” San Lang took a shaky breath. “I didn’t kiss you back because you were drunk. Not because I didn’t want to. And because there is so much I hadn’t told you.”

Xie Lian's cheeks burned. "Like the fact you're a ghost?"

San Lang squeezed his waist, and Xie Lian shivered again, but for a very different reason. "Yes, Gege."

"But there is still so much you haven't told me." It wasn't a question. Xie Lian knew San Lang was battling with untold secrets.

"Gege, there is so much I want to tell you—"

"But you can't."

San Lang sniffed and looked down at their feet.

"San Lang, I don't care. I trust you. If you can't tell me, that's okay. I trust you."

Rain flowed off the awning and onto the cobblestones like a waterfall. One of the lanterns blew out, casting them into darkness.

"Your Highness, I swear, I will find a way to tell you. I will find a way to make this right. You are the only thing that matters to me. I will protect you."

"I'll protect you, too, San Lang. I'll protect you, too."

San Lang rasped a breath. It was hard to see his expression clearly now that it was so dark, but he didn't miss the feeling of his mask being lifted from his face, the wet air hitting his heated cheeks. So cool and crisp. He could feel San Lang's sweet breath ghosting across his lips.

“You smell like citrus and mango,” San Lang whispered, and Xie Lian shivered.

“Oh, ah…it’s the…um…”

Heat fizzed in Xie Lian’s belly. They were so close. Their lips were so close. He could practically taste San Lang’s smell of smoke and flowers. He ached with want—wanted with need. Need. Touch. Heat. He shuddered.

“San Lang,” he whispered.

“Gege…”

San Lang leaned in.

Chapter End Notes

Forgiveness...please....

410, 757, 864, 530 JOYS

Chapter Notes

You GUYS! Gah! Your comments and heckling make my LIFE! When you cutely heckle me and send me all your speculations and rage against Jun Wu (and rage against the author, because honestly that last cliffhanger was low), I squeal and kick my feet and UGLY CRY (although, one lovely commenter mentioned I shouldn't be crying alone in the dark, and I adore them for that). THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT! Okay, okay, so...does anyone want to have a guess as to what was in Jun Wu's drink in the last chapter? Ha ha ha ha. Okay, enough.

After this chapter...I wonder if anyone will piece it together.

I was a little mean last week, guys. Please accept this as my apology?

CW: Kind of dubious consent? But, like...in a good way? Is that a thing? Well. We all loved chapter 127. I mean, I did.

“Your Highness,” San Lang whispered. For the barest moment, his lips brushed against Xie Lian’s—a featherlight touch—and they both shuddered. His lips were cool and soft as rose buds. “Gege.”

“San Lang.”

San Lang ran the pad of his thumb along Xie Lian’s wet cheekbone. “Has Gege ever been kissed before?”

Xie Lian shook his head. The roar of his heart drowned out the patter of rain.

He hadn’t ever been kissed before.

A drunk woman in an inn had caught him off guard several hundred years ago. He’d been yawning, and their tongues had touched before Xie Lian could yank away. But he didn’t

really think that counted. Xie Lian had never been kissed, never been touched, not even by himself. He'd never felt the pull, the need, the want.

When he was the Crown Prince of Xianle, his cultivation practice had been that of abstinence from worldly pleasures. His guoshi had taught him that the body was a temple. Lust and pleasures of the flesh were base, and Xie Lian should not sully his purity with such depraved acts. Xie Lian never gave his cultivation practice much thought—it suited him fine and excused him from the trappings of the life his parents had laid before him. Never had he wanted a harem. Never had he wanted to marry a princess and breed a horde of royals. All things expected of a prince. Ascension had been, in a way, an escape.

But with the rise of the modern era, those antiquated ideas fell away. No one expected anything of him, so he never really needed to explain why he had little interest in sex or romance. While he received a lot of attention for his looks, he'd never felt the pull. He'd long since determined he just didn't have those feelings or interests. That is, until San Lang.

Now…

Now. Kissing San Lang was all he could think about.

His body was alive for the first time in 2000 years, thrumming with adrenaline, with terror… and with what might have been…ah…desire.

His belly felt funny now. Tight and fizzing. He was a little tingly and lightheaded. San Lang's smell, his touch, the way he towered over Xie Lian, it made him feel funny. Desperate. Dizzy. Giddy. Ah, and restless! So restless. His thoughts were spinning and his mouth watered.

San Lang's mouth hovered near his, his long fingers squeezing Xie Lian's waist, pulling them flush. The wind whipped rain at them, and somewhere in the distance, chimes tinkled, but Xie Lian barely noticed.

"Does Gege want this San Lang to kiss him?"

Xie Lian swallowed hard. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Gege, Gege.” San Lang released a shaky breath. “Do you know how I have longed to kiss you?”

A smile pulled at the corner of Xie Lian’s lips. “Ah. I think perhaps I do.”

San Lang closed his eyes. His lips grazed Xie Lian’s once more, lingering on the corner of his mouth. He tasted so sweet. His lips were so soft. Xie Lian shuddered.

“Gege…”

Xie Lian caught a blur of white out of the corner of his eye. At the end of the street, beneath the bobbing lanterns. A mask. A half-smiling, half-crying mask. Worn by a man in white.

Xie Lian jolted back with a silent scream, the hairs on his arms standing on end.

Time slowed. His thoughts roared.

He blinked, and the street was empty.

He stood staring, his blood thick with ice and fire.

“Gege!” San Lang said, grabbing his wrist. He followed Xie Lian’s gaze, but there was no one there.

Xie Lian opened his mouth. And closed it. And opened it again.

“Gege! Look at me! What happened?”

“I…I…I thought I saw…” He shook his head. His teeth began to chatter, and he broke out into full-body shivers. He took a step back, his thoughts muffled and thick.

No. It was impossible. Bai Wuxiang was long dead. Had been dead for nearly 2000 years. Slain by the Heavenly Emperor.

His belly roiled.

“Gege!” San Lang’s eyes were bright with alarm, his long black hair whipping in the wind.

“I thought I saw a mask. I thought I saw a half-smiling, half-crying mask. But that…that’s—” He choked on his words, his eyes darting to every shadow, every corner. “But that’s impossible,” he whispered. “That’s impossible.”

San Lang said nothing. His grip tightened on Xie Lian’s arm. “Let’s go.”

On the way back to the bookshop, Xie Lian’s heart thudded in his ears, and he checked over his shoulder every few seconds. He jumped at the smallest noise and startled at every masked ghost on the street.

Hua Cheng had never sent terror into his heart this way.

“I…I am seeing things. I must be seeing things. It can’t be.” Xie Lian laughed, but he sounded hysterical. “Right, San Lang?”

San Lang squeezed his hand. “I won’t let anything hurt you, Gege. But let’s get back to the shop, hmn?”

They arrived at the shop just as Gorgo was setting the sign to closed. He wasn't alone. Feng Xin and Mu Qing were bickering in the *Contempt* orary Romance section, while Shi Qingxuan was eyeing He Xuan from behind the counter with a strange look on their face. He Xuan was pointedly ignoring the Wind Master. A little too pointedly. Shi Qingxuan watched a moment longer. Then, switching to their male form, turned their back.

Everyone looked their way as San Lang locked the shop door behind them.

"Your Highness!" Feng Xin and Mu Qing shouted simultaneously.

"What's wrong?" Feng Xin barked, taking in Xie Lian's pale pallor and chattering teeth. He turned to San Lang. "What did you do to him?"

"You'd better have kept your filthy hands off him," Mu Qing said, crossing his arms.

"That's enough." Xie Lian shed his dripping jacket, and Gorgo took it from him, hanging it on the knobbly coat tree.

San Lang smirked, but it lacked its usual vigour. "Do you two knob heads just stand around pulling each other's hair, waiting for His Highness to show up?"

"San Lang. You, too. Enough." Xie Lian eyed the locked door and shivered.

"This one apologises. I didn't mean to upset Gege."

"Your Highness, are you okay?" Shi Qingxuan jumped to their feet and unravelled their thick mint-green cashmere scarf and wrapped it around Xie Lian's shoulders. "You look like you've seen a….a…hahahahaha! You look like you've seen a ghost! No offence, San Lang. No offence!"

Foreign emotion wrapped around Xie Lian's throat as Qingxuan pulled the scarf tight around him. It was indeed very warm and cosy. "My gratitude, Qingxuan."

“Your Highness, Lord Wind Master is right. You look rattled.” Feng Xin, too, was still dripping rain onto the pocked wooden floors. His topknot had come loose, and wisps of hair hung around his handsome face. “What happened?”

“I…” Xie Lian paused, his heart hammering. “I saw Bai Wuxiang.”

The room fell silent.

“Here in Ghost City?” He Xuan spoke for the first time. He looked more alert than he usually did. His sea-foam eyes wide. “White No Face?”

“But, that’s impossible!” Feng Xin shouted. “He’s been dead thousands of years. Slain by the Heavenly Emperor himself.”

Xie Lian shook his head. He knew this would be the reaction. Ah, never mind, never mind.

“Are you sure that’s what you saw,” Mu Qing said, his arms still crossed.

“En. I’m sure.” He didn't mention that he had also doubted what he'd seen.

“I dunno. You’ve had a rough night, Your Highness, running into Hua Cheng and all, not to mention turning down Jun Wu’s offer to appoint you to his palace. You can’t be sure that’s what you saw. It’s storming out. It might have been a trick of the light.”

San Lang laughed without mirth.

“What’s that look for?” Mu Qing sputtered.

San Lang flashed a smile, teeth sharp as knives. “I’m curious, is all. Do you enjoy contradicting others?”

“Pardon me?”

San Lang’s fake smile widened. “Are you sure you want to doubt His Highness about Bai Wuxiang after all you’ve recently learned? Or have you already forgotten what happened the last time you doubted him?”

Panic flared inside Xie Lian. No, no he didn’t want to think about that now. He didn’t want to have this conversation now. Not with Feng Xin and Mu Qing.

Mu Qing’s mouth fell open, the high colour of his cheeks draining until he was nearly grey. He looked down at his feet.

“I know what I saw,” Xie Lian said, gathering himself. His voice was flat. “I don’t understand it, but it was him. The same half-smiling, half-crying mask.”

He Xuan raised a dark brow. The pearl on his necklace slid along the silver chain as he shifted. “What is with you and calamities, Your Royal Highness *Xie Qian* ? Both the red and the white calamity? That’s…fucked up. And I’ve heard rumours about the green calam—”

“He Xuan, you are speaking about His highness. Zip it.” Right before their eyes, Gorgo’s hair and eye colour changed to bright tangerine. “I think it’s time for the Heavenly Officials to leave. You can come back tomorrow or never. Apart from you, Lord Wind Master. You are always welcome. I would hire you in an instant if you were amenable.”

He Xuan paled, which was quite a feat, considering his already ghostly-white skin.

“Apologies, Your Royal Highness. Unfortunately, if there is another calamity in the city, I will need to warn Hua Cheng. Shutting down the city might be in order. Rest assured, you will be safe here, Your Highness. Not even a calamity can surpass my wards.” Gorgo lowered

the lanterns, his now bright-orange eyes flashing. “You might mention to your generals they should leave before it’s done.”

And with that, Gorgo disappeared in a puff of smoke. He Xuan rolled his eyes and muttered something under his breath.

Feng Xin looked like he wanted to protest, but after a moment, his shoulders slumped. “Your Highness. We will return soon.”

“Don’t fucking tell anyone where he is,” San Lang hissed, his fake smile gone. “No one. Not even Jun Fucking Wu. Get it?”

“Watch your mouth, little ghost,” Mu Qing growled.

He Xuan laughed. “Little ghost? Are you blind? He’s twice your size, idiot.”

Mu Qing’s eyes widened in rage, but there was a flicker of uncertainty there. He met Xie Lian’s gaze for a single moment, his expression naked. Without a word, he brushed past Feng Xin, and out the door into Ghost City. A moment later, Feng Xin followed.

Shi Qingxuan gave a little wave. “Please thank Gorgo for the job opportunity, Your Highness and San Lang! I will consider it! Ha ha ha ha ha ha. Your Highness. See you soon!”

“Qingxuan! Your scarf!” Xie Lian called.

“Keep it, LianLian. It suits you!” And with a gentle breeze, they were gone, without a single look He Xuan’s way.

***

Xie Lian and San Lang climbed the creaky, narrow stairs. The wind rattled the windows, and the din of rain turned their small room into an auditorium of white noise. Xie Lian changed into dry sleep clothes, while San Lang set to work boiling water for their dinner in their makeshift kitchen. He lit the stubby beeswax candlesticks in black porcelain candleholders, and lined them along the window, save for the one he placed on the table between them.

They knelt at the table before their meagre dinner, neither feeling energetic enough for anything beyond instant noodles. The steam from their mugs billowed between them, blurring the soft candlelight. Xie Lian was so exhausted, he could barely keep himself up, and he slumped forward over his food.

San Lang cradled his mug in his long slender fingers. It was a mug he'd picked up quite recently that said "Cowboy butts drive me nuts", while Xie Lian's mug read, "Born to frolic, world is a garden, Love em all 1989, I am a happy fawn, 410, 757, 864, 530 JOYS". Truth be told, it was Xie Lian's very favourite of the mugs. The little fawn on the front just looked so happy!

"Gege carries a heavy burden," San Lang said, his soft whisper muted by the din of the rain. The candle flickered between them.

Xie Lian released a shaky breath. His appetite dissolved. "I think I always knew Jun Wu hadn't killed him. The dread has always been there, in the back of my mind. My gut said he still existed."

San Lang said nothing. He, too, had yet to touch his dinner.

"Ah, I was going to—I should have told you. I was actually—ha ha, I mean to say, Bai Wuxiang and I have quite the history. Though…" He trailed off. His belly knotted. "It's been many years."

San Lang watched him carefully, his heterochromatic eyes dancing in the candlelight. "Violence like that lives in the body forever—it imprints on the soul. Time dulls it, but never goes away."

Xie Lian nodded. “I assume, since San Lang knows everything about everything, that is well versed on the White Clothed Calamity?”

“Mnm. He was credited with the downfall of the Xianle kingdom.”

“And here I thought that credit belonged to me.” Xie Lian offered a wry smile.

“Gege often takes responsibility for things that are not his fault.”

“It was my kingdom, was it not. I descended to protect it and failed.” Xie Lian could easily speak of it now without feeling. 2000 years had allowed him to build walls around those memories.

San Lang’s expression was unreadable, only the thinning of his lips giving away his mood. “His Highness did the best he could under the circumstances. I’d put the blame on the Emperor, myself. Those fuckers in Heaven did nothing while you fought a devastation-level ghost king.”

“Ah…does…” Xie Lian’s mouth was dry. His thoughts were in chaos. San Lang knew so much, even for a ghost. It was uncanny. His gaze flickered to San Lang’s butterfly tattoos. To his red sweater. To the look in his eyes that was so like Hua Cheng’s. “Is San Lang old enough to remember the Xianle kingdom?”

San Lang’s lips parted, but he said nothing.

What was he asking? San Lang had already made it clear there were questions he could not answer. Xie Lian waved his hand in the air. “Never mind. That was thoughtless of me.

“Gege should try to eat.”

Xie Lian raised a brow, his gaze darting toward San Lang’s untouched mug of noodles.

San Lang sighed. “Ghosts don’t need to eat. Won’t Gege ease this San Lang’s worry?”

Xie Lian smiled and nodded. He took a small sip from his mug. The soup tasted like nothing, but it was hot and eased the burning in his belly. He gathered his chopsticks and began to eat in earnest. San Lang followed his lead. For a while, they ate in silence.

The wind howled, thrashing the now sodden and dark paper lanterns in the streets, whipping rain against the pebbled windows. The candle guttered.

“I like the wind,” Xie Lian said absently.

San Lang looked up from his noodles.

Xie Lian continued. “Ah, it’s like…it has its own voice. Its own rhythm. I spent many a solitary night during my travels with only the wind for company. I like to feel we’ve developed a mutual understanding. When it blows, I am moved.”

“Gege.” San Lang set down his chopsticks. “What happened during your meeting with Jun Wu? You seemed very upset. Are you considering his offer?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “Ah, San Lang. I am ashamed of my reaction in the Gambler’s Den. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. But…I….ah, I don’t think I could bear returning to the Heavens. I should be—” He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. When he opened his eyes again, San Lang was watching him intently. “Almost 2000 years ago, I got myself into a bit of a predicament—one I couldn’t escape on my own. I was in a bad way. Jun Wu found me. He, ah…he took care of me when I couldn’t take care of myself. I suppose seeing the Heavenly Emperor…never mind, never mind.”

“Gege, do you mean when you were trapped in a coffin?”

Xie Lian's jaw dropped. "How does San Lang know about that?"

"Your nightmare, Gege. You kept repeating that you weren't in the coffin anymore. I… wondered. I worried."

"Ah." Xie Lian nodded in understanding. It wasn't something he'd ever spoken about. With anyone. But it felt okay that San Lang knew. It felt right, even. Like a weight removed from his heart. "Truthfully, yes. I was trapped. And Jun Wu found me. I owe him a great debt. I'm not sure how long I would have been in there were it not for his aid. But San Lang, this was a long, long time ago."

"How long was Gege trapped?"

"For…for a while."

"How long is a while?"

Xie Lian sighed, his blood pulsing in his ears. "A century, I think. I don't really remember."

San Lang's expression was unreadable, but the room seemed to grow darker.

"San Lang? Are you…okay?"

"Of course, Gege. I'm always okay."

Xie Lian jumped, sloshing broth from his mug onto the table, as piercing sirens echoed through the city, rattling in his skull. The sirens reminded him very much of the air raid sirens of WWII. Beyond the windows, the street lamps went out one by one, and the sky darkened from deep caramine to true black—the kind of black that absorbed all light.

“Hmn. Hua Cheng has shut down the city, then,” San Lang said with a glance out the window. “Bai Wuxiang will be hunted. If he’s still here, he’s dead. For real this time. But I doubt he’s still here. This is Hua Cheng’s territory.”

“Oh,” Xie Lian said. “San Lang?”

“Mnm?”

“Tomorrow. I think I want to find Hua Cheng. I need to…talk to him. I need to…”

San Lang was silent.

They finished their noodles, and San Lang blew out the candles. They crawled into their own beds, but each on the very edge of their mattress so that their noses were nearly touching. San Lang ran the tips of his fingers along Xie Lian’s cheekbone, along the bow of his bottom lip. Xie Lian shivered.

“Gege, I am here. I will always be here. You are not alone. You can lean on me.”

Xie Lian’s eyes fluttered closed. His body was so heavy. His eyelids so heavy. He didn’t want to think anymore.

“San Lang,” he whispered. He could still feel Hua Cheng’s eyes on him. He could still feel Jun Wu’s disapproval. He could still feel the gentle brush of San Lang’s lips against his own, soft as rose petals.

Xie Lian didn’t remember falling asleep. He drifted off to the thrum of the rain on the room and to the gentle puffs of San Lang’s breath against his cheek.

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Was this really happening?

Granules of dirt embedded beneath his fingernails, earth compacted down his throat. Pressure built in his ears. Humming. Vibrations through his bones—through the earth surrounding his coffin, shaking loose reams of centipedes and spiders.

The walls of the coffin pressed in on him, invisible but weighty. It had been 100 years since he'd taken a breath, and his lungs were dried husks, collapsed and dusty. His moments of life were fleeting—bright hot pain and suffocation interrupted by dragging hours of sucking death.

And he was alone, alone, alone.

Darkness again, then a spark of consciousness as his heart slipped over a new beat and jerked violently around the dowel.

"Gege, I am here. I will always be here. You are not alone."

The humming bothered his ears—ached between his teeth—but it was fine. Only seconds remained. He would be dead again in a moment. Xie Lian's heart shuddered and thrashed. Hot blood flooded beneath his red-lacquered robes, pooling along his clavicle—along the pale pillar of his neck. Drops of blood shivered and jumped at his pulse points.

"Gege."

Xie Lian turned his head.

San Lang lay beside him in the coffin, his fire and shadow eyes glinting in the darkness.

"Gege, it is a heavy curse," he said, but his lips didn't move. His eyes were vacant. Empty and useeing.

There was a thudding on the roof of the coffin. Crack. Thud. Crack. San Lang stared at him still, his lips moving without sound.

Thud. Crack. Thud.

The lid lifted, and red moonlight flooded the coffin. Bai Wuxiang looked down on them.

"Xie Lian," Bai Wuxiang purred from behind the half-smiling, half-crying mask, "I've been waiting for you to ask for my help. You never learn, do you."

Xie Lian's eyes snapped open, his breath coming in harsh pants.

The room was dark. A single candle flickered in the rain-pebbled window. The microwave clock blinked.

His body was hot, pressed flush against San Lang. He was no longer in his own bed. Somehow, during his chaotic dreaming, he'd shifted over into San Lang's bed. And he was absolutely drenched with sweat.

But the sweat wasn't his own. Or, at least, not all of it.

San Lang whimpered in his sleep, his lashes fluttering. He twitched, and his pale temple glistened with sweat. Did ghosts sweat? Why was San Lang so hot?

"Your Highness, help. Help me." San Lang's pleas were the barest whisper. Xie Lian wasn't sure he'd heard him right.

"Let me out! Oh, Your Highness, please! Someone let me out of here!" This time his voice was louder. Clearer. "Let me out," San Lang sobbed. "Mother! Your Highness! Ju Wu, you fucker!"

Tears streamed down San Lang's face, and he shook, even in his sleep.

"San Lang," Xie Lian called out in alarm. He gently shook San Lang, cold terror seizing his heart. Whatever San Lang was dreaming, it sounded like he was being tortured. He cradled San Lang in his arms, rocking him back and forth, not wanting to startle him awake. "San Lang, shhh! You're dreaming. Your gege has you. I have you, San Lang."

San Lang gasped as if he was choking. His eyes opened—and his eyes looked wrong. Far away and panicked, haunted, as if he wasn't quite a part of the world.

“Shhh, your gege has you. You are safe. Shhh…” He carded his fingers through San Lang’s sweat-drenched hair, continuing to rock him as San Lang panted hot breaths against his cheek.

“Gege…Gege…” San Lang sobbed, clinging to Xie Lian. His whole body shook, and Xie Lian’s heart shattered. “Gege, please!”

“I’m here, San Lang. I’m here. You’re safe.”

The single candle in the window sputtered and went out. San Lang rested his forehead against Xie Lian’s, his breath still coming in sharp gasps.

“Gege…”

“San Lang.”

San Lang’s eyes fluttered open. He watched Xie Lian for a moment, his gaze filled with wonder. With awe. There was a beat, and Xie Lian’s stomach fluttered. Then San Lang’s lips were crushed against his own, hot and slick. Sweet. Soft.

Xie Lian froze in shock, his whole body going rigid.

San Lang’s tongue slid against his bottom lip—as he bit and sucked and licked. So sweet. So soft. The erotic brush of San Lang’s tongue was enough to make him moan and shudder, his body humming in response. This wasn’t a first time kind of kiss. This was desperate. This was hungry and wild. Yearning. And, oh, how Xie Lian yearned. But wait! It was happening so fast!

He squirmed, trying to ease the intensity, trying to get away, to make sense of what was happening, but San Lang held him tight, devouring his mouth like the finest of delicacies.

San Lang's long fingers squeezed his waist, kneading and pulling, and Xie Lian shuddered again, tingles chasing down his spine, his belly fizzing with sensations he had never before felt. There was an ache between his legs, a strange fluttering. It was overwhelming and… intoxicating. The feeling bloomed low in his belly, hot and liquid.

"San Lang," Xie Lian whispered against San Lang's lips. He tried once more to squirm away, but San Lang squeezed his waist hard, pulling their bodies flush.

And Xie Lian jolted, his mind blanking.

There was a hardness there…against his thigh.

San Lang's hardness.

Panic flooded him—panic and a sparkling excitement. A molten need, throbbing in his core. It was then he realised his own hardness was pressing against San Lang, and he shuddered, his body flushing cold and then hot. So hot. Too hot. He was sweating and shivering, gasping for air against San Lang's mouth.

"Gege," San Lang's rich voice went right to the ache between his legs, and with a spasm, he rutted against San Lang's hip.

San Lang gasped, his eyes fluttering open—one eye fiery red, one midnight black. There was a ferocious hunger in his gaze, and Xie Lian trembled with arousal.

A long string of saliva connected their now parted lips. They watched each other, panting in the darkness. Xie Lian's cheeks burned. As overwhelming as the kissing was, it was even more overwhelming not to be kissing. Without a thought in his head, he crashed his mouth against San Lang's, parting his lips, finding San Lang's tongue with his own. He tangled his fingers in San Lang's hair and pulled just a little too hard.

San Lang moaned, and with a subtle shift of his hips, he tucked their erections together. Oh. Oh, that felt so good.

Xie Lian was shaking, gasping, his body shivering, Goosebumps chased over his skin, along his rib cage, down his spine. The slick of San Lang's lips, the drag of his tongue, his sweet breath…ah, ah, ah…

He was barely aware that they were frotting against each other, seeking friction, seeking heat. The drag of his clothed erection against San Lang's hardness made him shudder and his eyes fluttered closed. A strange, bright-hot feeling was coiling in his belly. It was too much. Too much and not enough.

San Lang slid his hand into the back of Xie Lian's sleep pants, squeezing his naked ass and using the extra momentum to grind his cock against Xie Lian's. They moaned into one another's mouths.

The feeling in his belly was building, building, building. He was too hot, and his clothes felt strange against his skin. His heart was beating too fast. He was too hot. Too hot. His skin was scorching, and his thoughts reeled. San Lang, San Lang, San Lang.

He couldn't…ah…it was…he was…

San Lang did something obscene with his tongue, and Xie Lian's mind went white.

"San Lang!" he roared as a shockwave ripped through his body, warmth spilling in his pants. The force of his orgasm rushed over him, as he rocked in San Lang's embrace, chasing that feeling. Wanting more. More. More. Ah…

San Lang keened and squeezed him so hard, it almost hurt. His whole body shook, and he moaned.

They were clinging to one another, terrified to let go. Xie Lian's heart crashed in his ears, and sweat dampened his hairline, collecting along his collar bones.

"Gege…" San Lang whispered.

"San Lang."

"Gege…"

After a while, Xie Lian's heart calmed. His body was heavy, and despite the stickiness in his sleep pants, he had never been so comfortable.

They fell back to sleep that way, wrapped up in one another. Xie Lian never wanted to let go.

A Thousand Deaths

Chapter Notes

Ahhh I am a little late with this chapter! Real life kicked my ass last week, and all I wanted to do was disappear into Ghost City with you fine folk. To make it up to you, the chapters will be coming pretty quickly now. Next on Saturday night, and if it isn't posted, I will have to be heckled, unfortunately. Ha ha ha, I seriously love your heckling. You all hold such a special place in my heart. When I'm reading your comments, I'm either cheering, belly laughing, or ugly crying. I love you all. So much.

I will have to tell you...there were a few correct answers about what was in Jun Wu's drink. Just a reminder, XL enjoyed his drink. JW did not. he he he

Also also also, I have been reading all of your big brained guesses about what the hell is going on, and I am DAZZLED! HOW THO! You wonderful Hualians are just incredible!

A quick shoutout to Cl0ud_calico_k0i again for putting up with my nonsense and listening to my deranged ideas. I adore you, and I am so lucky to have met you. Also a thanks to the peeps in the discord for all the wild mugs ideas! I salute you!

This lowly author is grateful to you beauties. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Xie Lian’s memories were illusive things—coloured by a feeling, by the reek of rotting corpses, the low-hanging moon, a whispered lullaby, a city ablaze, a gentle smile—fragile or steely. The energy of time had altered their mass, and they’d taken on a new and peculiar intensity. They bled into his dreams, flooded his days—they bonded like crystals. They had become a quickening of what now was.

He watched his memories now, superimposed over the moment as San Lang’s eyelashes fluttered in dreaming and the first fragments of dawn set Ghost City ablaze.

Xie Lian had died a thousand deaths—a thousand times a thousand deaths in the coffin—but none compared to this moment. A reawakening. A rebirth.

San Lang opened his eyes. One black eye, one crimson red. He blinked, watching Xie Lian watch him. What colour had the eyes been behind Wu Ming's mask? Like this maybe?

As the haze of sleep cleared between them, San Lang stiffened. His eyes widened. He sat up with a jolt, running his fingers through his wild mane of raven feather hair.

"San Lang?" Xie Lian pushed himself up onto his knees. It was still sticky between his legs and his cheeks heated.

"Your Highness," San Lang whispered, and there was real fear in his voice. "I…Your Highness, I…this lowly one—" He gasped for breath. "Fuck!"

San Lang's panic went through and through him, and his mouth fell open.

"Your Highness, I shouldn't have touched you without permission. I shouldn't have…I—"

Xie Lian's stomach dropped, and shame licked at his belly. Had he…should he not have...what had he done? "Ah…was San Lang…did San Lang not want—"

"No!" The word was said with such force, Xie Lian was taken aback. San Lang's eyes were bright with intensity, a dark swath of hair falling across his pale brow. "Gege, of course I wanted, more than you could possibly know. I have always wanted you…in that way. But I am not worthy of—"

Xie Lian didn't let him finish. He brushed closer, climbing into San Lang's lap, pressing their mouths together. Again. And again. Kisses peppering his cheeks, the slight point of his chin, his jaw, the tender spot behind his ear, and then back to his mouth.

San Lang breathed a startled gasp, and Xie Lian drank his sweet breath, drank it down. Magic roiled beneath San Lang's moon-pale skin. It whispered and pulsed. So powerful. It ran like a dark river through him, flooding his meridians in perpetuity. It must have been very difficult

to hide his abundant spiritual energy for so long. Keeping it subdued with the rest of his secrets.

Why did Xie Lian feel this sudden earth shaking grief? Why did he suddenly feel like San Lang's spiritual energy was all for him? Why did he suddenly feel like if he wasn't close to San Lang, pressed against him, tasting his mouth, that he would die for real?

He licked against the seam of San Lang's lips, emboldened by the panic snaking up his spine—emboldened by the heat that turned to liquid low in his belly, fizzing and consuming. This feeling was new and sparkling. A magic Xie Lian had never before felt. It made him feel alive in a way he hadn't felt since his first ascension. Maybe not even then. San Lang shuddered. He was still as water on the surface, but beneath, Xie Lian could feel the need, the heat, the turmoil.

"San Lang was having a nightmare last night," Xie Lian whispered against San Lang's sweet mouth. "Were you reliving a moment from your past? Was San Lang once trapped somewhere?"

"Gege…Gege…" San Lang shuddered again.

He tentatively wrapped his long fingers around Xie Lian's waist, fully encircling him. His breaths were coming in harsh rasps, and his hardness pressed against Xie Lian's own. It was uncomfortable, with the stickiness of the night before still soaking his sleep pants, but Xie Lian didn't care.

"Gege is here to listen." Xie Lian kissed him again. "Was San Lang trapped somewhere in his dream?"

"I—" San Lang took a shaky breath. "En."

"But San Lang is unable to say anything more." It wasn't a question. Xie Lian knew, and a coldness clasped around his heart.

San Lang was silent, apart from the rasping of his heavy breaths. His dark fan of black lashes fluttered in the golden light of morning. Xie Lian clumsily pressed his lips to San Lang's once more. He didn't know what he was doing—never had he done anything like this, nor had he ever looked too closely at what others did. Again, he brushed his tongue against San Lang's pale lips the same way San Lang had done to him last night.

San Lang moaned so loudly, it startled Xie Lian. So he did it again, licking into San Lang's mouth. He squeezed his eyes shut against the intensity of the emotions agitating within him. All the versions of himself, all the years on this earth, all his condensed and resistant memories unfurling.

"Gege…" he breathed. "Is this…is it really okay? Can I really have you like this?"

Xie Lian didn't know how to move or what might feel good for San Lang, but all shyness was gone, and only need remained, soft and humming around the edges. Need and love. Hopeless, ravenous, all-consuming love for the ghost in his arms. He opened his mouth against San Lang's. He desperately wanted to experience it again—San Lang's mouth. San Lang's desire. San Lang's pleasure.

"Have me," Xie Lian muttered. His body and mind were a torrent of bright hot want. "I've always been yours."

A broken sob escaped San Lang's lips, and Xie Lian swallowed it whole. He would swallow all San Lang's pain. All of it. He was very good at swallowing pain.

In an instant, Xie Lian was on his back, and San Lang's weight was bearing down on him, their erections pressed together once more. Pleasure and panic tingled along Xie Lian's spine and he gasped.

"Gege," San Lang whispered, pressing him into the mattress. "Gege, I want to taste you more—I have dreamed so long of tasting you. I want to devour you."

Xie Lian could only moan in response as San Lang kissed him deeply, so deeply—a hungry ghost. San Lang kissed and nipped down his jaw, down his neck, sharp canines catching on

tender skin. San Lang lifted up onto his knees. He peeled Xie Lian's sleep pants away, sliding them over his ass, and down his legs. His erection sprung free, already leaking precum.

Xie Lian squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to see his own desire. His cheeks burned with shame and the return of his shyness—all the repressed parts of himself that hadn't faded with time.

"Gege is so beautiful." San Lang's velvety voice caressed him, and he shivered with anticipation as San Lang pulled Xie Lian's T-shirt up over his head. "So, so, perfect and lovely."

Xie Lian opened his eyes to find San Lang had shucked off his own T-shirt and sleep pants. His erection was much…much bigger. So big and long. So smooth and perfect. It gave him a thrill, and Xie Lian could only stare in awe, ignoring his own throbbing desire. He wanted to touch. To taste. Could he even fully wrap his hands around it? He didn't know how or what to do.

"Won't you allow this lowly believer to worship his beautiful prince?" San Lang hummed. "His beautiful god?"

Xie Lian took a shuddering breath, his heart shattering. "Ah, San Lang. I am not a prince or a god anymore."

"His Highness will always be His Highness."

Xie Lian's heart stuttered and tears pricked behind his eyes. Years of grief rushed to the surface, fusing with crazed fervour.

San Lang kissed and licked down Xie Lian's abdomen, the softness of his concave belly. He ran the tips of his fingers along Xie Lian's cock, from base to tip, and the foreign touch snapped something inside him.

“Ah! San Lang!” he cried, and tears streamed down his face. He was shaking with heat and need and sensation.

Then San Lang did the unimaginable. He licked the pearls of precum from the tip of Xie Lian’s cock.

Xie Lian’s entire body jerked, and he sobbed wetly. San Lang closed his mouth around the tip, swirling his tongue and sucking. Before swallowing it down.

Xie Lian writhed and shook, begging and crying out. His belly fizzed and coiled, and saliva pooled beneath his tongue. His orgasm built fast, too fast, as San Lang sucked and licked his length, and oh, he thought he might explode.

“San Lang, San Lang,” he gasped. “I want…”

“Hmn?” San Lang pulled off of his cock with a smack, and Xie Lian just about came just from the sound alone. “What does Gege want?”

“I want”—he panted, trying to hold back the rush in his belly—“to go together.” He’d imagined more of what they’d done last night—rutting against one another until the pleasure overcame them. Could they still do this naked?

San Lang’s eyes darkened with desire. He was breathing fast and deep. “Your Highness.”

Reverently, San Lang positioned himself above Xie Lian. He took both of their cocks in hand, stroking them together, and Xie Lian sucked in a breath. They were both slippery from precum, saliva, and the remnants of last night’s frenzied passion, and the slick squelching sound made Xie Lian’s cheeks burn and his belly swirl. The sensation of San Lang’s long fingers, of the wet slide of his hardness against Xie Lian’s…

“San Lang!” he cried, fisting his hands in the sheets. The pleasure expanded in his belly, and he gasped, his desire spilling out.

San Lang shook, and goosebumps covered his pale skin as he came with a sob, thin ropes of cum decorating Xie Lian's white-jade belly.

Their kisses grew languid. Soft and hazy around the edges. Xie Lian couldn't help but cling and plaster his sticky body to San Lang's.

As the morning filled the room in rosy light, they stumbled out of bed and showered together, taking the time to wash one another's hair and kiss softly beneath the spray of water. They dressed in silence, smiling shyly at one another.

When they came down the stairs, Gorgo and He Xuan were in the back office, inventory lists and spreadsheets spread on the table before them amongst the towering dirty plates and bowls. They looked up when Xie Lian and San Lang came in. He Xuan rolled his eyes.

Gorgo raised his pointy chin and set his probably-bourbon glass on the table. He raised a single turquoise brow. "Lockdown is still in place. You two may as well take the day off."

"What? Why the fuck do they get the day off?" He Xuan's scowl almost made Xie Lian laugh. His gaze caught on Xie Lian and he huffed.

Gorgo grinned somewhat maniacally and downed his probably-bourbon in one gulp. "Back to work, fish boy."

San Lang snorted and threaded his fingers with Xie Lian's, leading him toward the door.

"Masks on, please!" Gorgo called after them.

"Oh, right!" Xie Lian said, donning his sparkly peach mask.

San Lang ignored Gorgo, refusing to wear his own mask. Ah, Xie Lian supposed he didn't really need it. He was, afterall, a ghost. Xie Lian was the true interloper here. San Lang didn't have a heartbeat or breathing to hide. Certainly, certainly.

His own heart panged with phantom grief, but he plastered a smile on his face beneath his mask.

Ghost City was surprisingly vibrant and busy, despite the strange atmosphere. The streets were perhaps even busier than usual. How odd. Xie Lian wondered how many ghosts even knew who Bai Wuxiang was? How many were old enough to remember? Perhaps they believed so fully in their mighty chengzhu that they felt no fear.

San Lang and Xie Lian made their way past the house of banshees mourning their 'dear lost babies', past the tea shops and restaurants, and into the chaos of street vendors. The Ghost City market was a riot of colour and sound. Ghosts of every ilk, every shape and size, gathered to buy any manner of product. Lanterns swayed in the crisp autumn breeze, and a string instrument quartet played strange and unsettling melodies.

Xie Lian scanned the market, searching for a half-smiling, half-crying mask. Uneasiness grew in his chest, vibrating and condensing. He took a slow, shuddering breath.

They paused at a street vendor selling silver jewellery. Laid out on black velvet cloth, was a selection of intricate and fragile silver pendants, bracelets, earrings, and charms. His eye was immediately drawn to a delicate butterfly pendant with wings like silver gauze, it reminded Xie Lian very much of the butterfly that had found him the day San Lang's apartment had burned to the ground.

"Does Gege like butterflies?" San Lang asked. His voice held a nervous waver, and Xie Lian smiled.

"Very much. Especially these delicate silver ones."

"Do they not…remind Gege of Hua Cheng?"

“Mnm. They do.”

“And that doesn’t bring Gege bad feelings?”

He shook his head. Before San Lang could say a word, Xie Lian selected the pendant and paid the vendor with a handful of Ghost City paper money. When he fastened the pendant around San Lang’s neck, the ghost was very still, his lips parted and his eyes wide. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he remained silent.

“Lovely,” Xie Lian said with a smile.

He couldn’t be sure, but he thought the tips of San Lang’s ears looked a little pink.

They continued through the market. Xie Lian leaned heavily against San Lang’s side. He could still taste his kisses, feel his touch, and his belly filled with a strange and euphoric buzzing. A part of him—a part that had only just awoken—wanted to take San Lang back to their little flat and try more of the pleasure.

They purchased some oddly formed white turnips from a vendor with dreadlocks as thick as snakes and a face that looked like it had collapsed in on itself. Xie Lian had yet to cook for San Lang, and he smiled to himself as he nestled the produce in his wicker bag.

“San Lang, I think I could live very happily in Ghost City for the rest of my days.”

“Is that so, Gege? Is it not too smelly and rambunctious? The lot here are not of the highest moral calibre.”

Xie Lian only smiled in response. Glossy crimson leaves fluttered at his feet and the smell of woodsmoke rose into the grey sky.

“Gege, Gege, if you want to stay in Ghost City, will you allow your San Lang to stay with you?”

Xie Lian laughed and reached up to poke San Lang’s pale cheek. “Certainly. You, me, and He Xuan will live very happily together.”

“Gege,” San Lang whined. Xie Lian was glad he wasn’t wearing a mask. Otherwise he would have missed the cute pouting. Ah, San Lang was so dear.

“Ha ha ha ha, sorry, sorry, San Lang. I couldn’t help myself just now.”

“This poor San Lang is a very jealous and greedy ghost. Wants to keep Gege all for himself.”

“San Lang needn’t worry. I belong to him alone.” Xie Lian’s cheeks prickled with heat, and he was grateful for the mask. He wasn’t sure what had come over him, only that he felt uneasy and restless, a strange grief of unknown origin swelling in his throat.

Just when Xie Lian was beginning to wonder if his words had been too sincere, San Lang snatched him into his arms, lifting his mask just enough to kiss him soundly.

The ghosts around them, who had been giving San Lang a wide berth, hooted and hollered, cajoling and sighing. When San Lang pulled away, he pressed his forehead to Xie Lian’s, eyes closed.

“San…San Lang?” Xie Lian’s heart thumped wildly in his chest. His feet dangled quite a ways above the ground. “Are you okay?”

San Lang was silent for so long, eyes closed and clinging, that Xie Lian began to think he wouldn’t answer. Finally, he set Xie Lian back onto his feet. “Of course, Gege. I’m always okay.”

Xie Lian knew that wasn't true. Something was bothering San Lang, but he decided not to press.

"Ah, okay, San Lang. What would you like for breakfast? Hairy eyeball stew or um"—he pointed to a platter of crisp white slivers that looked suspiciously like candied bone fragments—"whatever those are."

"Hmn, Gege, I know just the thing!"

He led Xie Lian down a stone passageway that was only wide enough for them to walk single file. The wind whipped their hair, and the smell of rotting leaves and cooking oil rose from the cobblestones.

They came into a steaming alley with even more street vendors, lanterns swinging above their heads in the crisp morning breeze. They stopped at a food stall selling beautiful steamed baozi. Xie Lian's mouth watered. He hadn't realised how hungry he was. Maybe from all their…um…activities. San Lang ordered him two different kinds, one with savoury mushroom filling that smelled divine, and one filled with custard filling for dessert.

The vendor was a ghost with three heads. One head turned toward them with a scowl. "Cash or charge?" he snarled, his greasy black hair hanging in his face.

The second head, with plump red cheeks and false eyelashes, smiled warmly. "The poor little dear is practically wasting away. Take two more, sweetheart. On the house."

The third head drooled in its sleep. Thankfully, it had a drip tray attached to its chin so the drool didn't reach the buns. Xie Lian tried not to look.

Xie Lian thanked the vendor profusely as San Lang handed over a card with a hard look.

They wandered through the alley, peering into the windows of shops and listening to the lively street music. Xie Lian couldn't help but moan as he bit into one of the mushroom

baozi.

“San Lang certainly knows the ins and outs of Ghost City.” Xie Lian took another bite and rudely spoke around a mouthful of food. “He knew just where to go for the most delicious breakfast. Almost as if…he’s lived here many years?”

San Lang chewed his own baozi, darting a quick glance at Xie Lian and then away. He didn’t reply.

“Has San Lang lived in Ghost City many years?”

San Lang frowned, finally meeting Xie Lian’s gaze. “En.”

“Ah, I see, I see. Perhaps you’ve been here several hundred years? Maybe a thousand? Longer?” When San Lang didn’t answer, Xie Lian continued. “Hmn, I want to know so much about San Lang’s past. I suppose I’ll have to wait.”

“Wait until when, Gege?”

“Ah, San Lang, every truth in its time.”

San Lang sucked in a breath. Xie Lian chanced a look at him. He was pale, so pale, his black hair tumbling down his back in thick, glossy waves. His new butterfly necklace sparkled along his collar bone. As they walked, the ghosts still gave San Lang a wide berth, sending nervous glances Xie Lian’s way.

“Does Gege still plan to speak with Hua Cheng?” San Lang said, breaking the uneasy silence between them.

“Hmn. Yes. And actually, San Lang, I’ve been thinking. It might be best if I visit the Gambler’s Den on my own. Speak with Hua Cheng in private. There are…things that need to

be said."

Xie Lian watched San Lang's expression carefully, but he gave nothing away. He nodded. "Maybe it's for the best. Just be careful, Gege."

Ah. Xie Lian shivered, his throat thickening. As expected.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. It was Feng Xin.

"I'm alive. Everything is fine. Don't panic." Xie Lian laughed nervously into the phone.

There was a long pause on the other end. "Your Highness, I—" Feng Xin cleared his throat awkwardly, and Xie Lian could hear the worry in his voice. "I tried to come and see you today, but Ghost City is still shut—no one in, no one out."

"Ah, yes. I am not sure when it will be open again."

A group of wild ghost children wearing grimy tattered clothing raced by, splashing through puddles. One shouted in a language Xie Lian hadn't heard in several hundred years.

"When it reopens, I'm wondering if maybe we could talk? I could come visit? Mu Qing said he wanted to come, too. I told him to fuck off."

"Of course, Feng Xin. Anytime."

"I want to say I'm sorry. For…never mind. It can wait." He sighed. "Call me when the lockdown is lifted."

"I will."

“Nothing on Bai Wuxiang, then?”

Xie Lian swallowed. He shook his head, but then realised Feng Xin couldn’t see him. “Nothing as of yet. I suspect he is no longer in the city. Probably.”

“And your ghost friend is…” Feng Xin trailed off.

“Hmn. San Lang and I are just having breakfast at the market. You should see it here. It’s marvellous.”

They paused at another market stand to buy stew meat. San Lang looked it over while Xie Lian held the bag.

“Your Highness. Call me. We really need to talk. And, uh, maybe with your friend around.”

“Okay, Feng Xin. Talk soon.”

The line disconnected.

“Your yelling friend is quite subdued today,” San Lang said. “He must be embarrassed. He and the other silly god said a lot of foolish things last night.”

“Ah, San Lang, they aren’t so bad. We have a…complicated history.”

San Lang’s eyes flashed as he placed the brown paper package of meat into the bag. “By that you must mean they abandoned you when you needed them most. That was a choice they made. Why did neither of them think to appoint you? Hmm?”

“San Lang, things aren’t always that absolute. Sometimes it’s not up to you to decide if the road is easy to walk. ”

“I might not be able to decide if the road is easy, but whether I walk it is entirely up to me,” San Lang said quietly.

Xie Lian blinked. His mouth had gone very dry. He stared up into San Lang’s glittering red and black eyes.

“Gege, am I wrong?”

Xie Lian took a shaky breath. “Ha ha ha, San Lang, you’re very right.”

When they returned to the shop, the sun was sinking into the horizon. Gorgo was sitting at the front desk, a glass bottle of probably-bourbon in front of him, the glow of lanterns and candles flickering around him like a halo. His turquoise hair stood on end.

“No sightings of Bai Wuxiang. Hua Cheng has lifted the lockdown,” Gorgo said without preamble.

Xie Lian took a slow breath. He’d been expecting as much. Bai Wuxiang wouldn’t be found if Bai Wuxiang didn’t want to be found

“I sent He Xuan home. I was tired of his complaining.” Suddenly, Gorgo’s turquoise eyes widened with glee, as if they hadn’t just been talking about Bai Wuxiang. “Oh! Baozi! Any for me?”

“En, of course.” Xie Lian handed him one of the custard buns he’d been too full to eat.

“Gege, it’s probably better we stay in tonight. Cook our own dinner. Rest up.”

Gorgo’s mouth pulled into a thin line. “That’s a good idea, *San Lang* . You two kids head on upstairs now.”

Xie Lian looked between them in confusion, but headed up the stairs without resistance when San Lang tugged on his fingers.

Xie Lian attempted to cook San Lang dinner with the ingredients they’d purchased from the market, though it ended in disaster. The stew had somehow taken on a strange purple glow, and the bottom of the pot had burned beyond salvaging.

San Lang shovelled his last bite into his mouth, scraping the bottom of his "don't put me in a situation" mug with the spoon. “Mmm, delicious, Gege. Though maybe a little more salt next time.”

“Ah, San Lang. So insincere.” Xie Lian couldn’t help but grin.

San Lang’s eyes widened in mock offence. “Gege, there is no one in the world more sincere than me.”

Xie Lian laughed.

In bed that night, San Lang made his body feel things he didn’t know were possible, and afterward, he lay boneless in San Lang’s arms.

“If only it could always be like this,” he whispered. “You and me. In Ghost City. Together.”

“It could be, Gege. We can make it happen.”

Xie Lian swallowed. “I would say that was true but for the warning in my heart.”

The moon hung low over the rooftops of Ghost city, spilling its light over the blankets.\

“Ah, San Lang, I wish…”

“What does Gege wish?”

Xie Lian couldn't bring himself to reply, and San Lang squeezed him tighter. Soon, they drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, San Lang was gone. And he did not return.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: everything is fucked.

A Riot Of Colour. A Cacophony Of Noise.

Chapter Notes

My dear friends! I am soaring high from your wonderful comments and kudos! Your investigatory skills are *chef's kiss*. I am in awe of you all! Thank you, thank you, thank you for making this journey so rich and beautiful.

So. Um. Things are gonna get very bad before they get better, but I just want to remind you that there WILL be a happy ending! I swear! Like, very happy. Ha ha ha ha okay. Phew. We are in the home stretch!

I love you all. Thank you. Your heckles are my meal.

The bookshop stayed closed.

A heavy storm shook the night, blanketing Ghost City in shimmering gloom. Usually Xie Lian sighed contentedly as he watched the rain, a cosy feeling reaching right down to his toes, but tonight he found no comfort in the drum of rain against the window or the flickering lantern light.

He sat cross legged on the floor, leaning against the speculative non-fiction shelf in the back of the labyrinthine bookshop. The books were particularly verbose this evening, whispering old tales and legends—some from his childhood, some he'd never before heard, some he wished he'd never heard. The bookshelves gently swayed and creaked, like the trees of a haunted forest.

He stared down at his phone, the screen reflecting the fairy lights above his head. The last 800 messages had been sent from him to San Lang. Begging him to respond. To tell him where he'd gone. To assure him he was safe. None of the messages had been delivered, and Xie Lian's belly roiled.

Feng Xin shifted uncomfortably on the floor across from him. "Your Highness, if he hasn't responded by now, he likely won't."

“Ah, but San Lang always replies to my texts.”

“So, what, you’ll text him but not us?” Mu Qing rolled his eyes. “Could we go sit somewhere more comfortable?”

“Don’t listen to them, LianLian.” Shi Qingxuan swept a lock of hair behind Xie Lian’s ear and leaned their head on his shoulder.

Thunder boomed, rattling the shop windows. Outside, the torrent of rain doubled down. Xie Lian took a shaky breath. San Lang was a ghost. A powerful ghost. A wicked storm wasn’t of concern. But still, Xie Lian didn’t like the idea of him wet and cold. Where was he? Where had he gone? Why hadn’t he even said goodbye?

Ruoye, sensing Xie Lian’s distress, unspooled from his wrist and curled in his lap. He petted the white silk band idly. Leaning against the shelf opposite him, Mu Qing and Feng Qing watched warily, following the silk band’s every movement with their eyes.

Mu Qing plucked a book from the Crimson Rain Sought Flower shelf and flipped through it, stretching his long legs on the floor in front of him. He paused on a page and frowned. “You know, all these books mention you? Hua Cheng and his feud with the Flower Crowned Martial God. If anyone knew you were here in Ghost City, there would be hell to pay.”

Xie Lian sighed. “Maybe. But no one has noticed me yet. Except maybe the real Hua Cheng. And he didn’t do anything about it.”

“The *real* Hua Cheng.” Mu Qing scoffed. “If Hua Cheng actually saw you in his Gambler’s Den, we would not be having this conversation. You’d be strung up in his dungeons until he found a way to remove your cursed shackle. Then you’d be dead. He didn’t see you.”

“He saw me. I am not mistaken.”

“Ha. You’re delusional.”

Shi Qingxuan took the book from Mu Qing and peered down at the cover. “Hua Cheng is really quite beautiful, isn’t he? Ha ha ha ha, I mean if you go for that whole murderous glare and evil aura thing.”

“Wind Master! Are you fucking serious right now?” Feng Xin lamented. “He’s a supreme ghost king! A calamity!”

Shi Qingxuan shrugged.

Xie Lian stared down at the screen of his cellphone, willing it to ring. Willing a text to come through. His stomach burned with acid, and his throat was thick with grief.

Shi Qingxuan bumped his shoulder with their own. “LianLian, your San Lang will message you back. I know he will.”

“I guess I’ll have to be the bad guy if no one else will.” Mu Qing crossed his arms, as if protecting himself from scorn. “I hate to say it, but—”

“General Xuan Zhen, if you hate to say it, then don’t.” Shi Qingxuan squeezed Xie Lian’s hand, threading their fingers together. It was an odd feeling, this touch. Not unpleasant, but a reminder that San Lang wasn’t here.

“Some things need to be said.” Mu Qing huffed. “Your Highness, you might need to consider that your lying little ghost friend just freaked out and left. I mean, you have two supreme ghost kings chasing after you. Who wouldn’t be freaked out? Running for the hills is an understandable reaction.”

“Shut the fuck up, Mu Qing,” Feng Xin growled. He chugged the last of his Crooked Tooth ale and set the empty bottle on the wooden floor at his side.

“I will have to disagree with you there,” Qingxuan said. “Have you seen the way San Lang looks at His Highness? And he certainly didn’t back down from Hua Cheng before. As a matter of fact, I seem to recall him running interference and saving the day. I don’t think anything is about to scare him off. Not even a ghost king.”

Mu Qing rolled his eyes again. “I dunno. He probably wanted to save his own skin. It’s Bai Wuxiang and Hua Cheng.”

It wasn’t that Xie Lian hadn’t considered that possibility. There had been a small part of him that had worried San Lang might leave. Didn’t everyone always leave? Hadn’t everyone always left?

But no. Not San Lang. San Lang would never leave him unless he had to. Or unless he was forced to.

Xie Lian thought of the little soldier on Beizi Hill.

Of the little ghost fire trapped in the cage of Bai Wuxiang’s claws.

Of Wu Ming consumed by a tempest of resentful spirits.

“Ah, Mu Qing. You don’t know him like I do.”

“How can you even say you know him? He’s lied to you before. What else hasn’t he told you?”

What else was San Lang unable to tell him, more like. There was much, of this Xie Lian was certain.

“Your Highness…” Feng Xin looked suddenly nervous, one fine brow quivering. “Maybe it’s for the best that he’s gone. You don’t need to protect him or anyone anymore, so you can

accept Jun Wu's offer."

Xie Lian stifled a shudder. Mu Qing narrowed his gaze.

"Oh? Jun Wu's offer?" Shi Qingxuan asked.

Feng Xin took a deep breath and continued, "That was actually what I needed to talk to you about, Your Highness. Jun Wu approached me yesterday. He wanted me to reach out to you, to tell you that he wants to rescind your banishment. He thinks you've been punished enough—he's only surprised you haven't ascended again on your own. He suggested that you could appoint your ghost friend yourself, but now that he's fucked off, we don't need to worry about him anymore."

"I—" Xie Lian could see the Heavenly Capital in his mind's eye. It had been 2000 years since he'd set foot upon those gilded streets, but it was burned into his memories. Cold. Sterile. Too-bright. Empty of joy.

Shi Qingxuan pulled out their fan and waved it dramatically in front of their face. "You think His Highness will just stop worrying about his San Lang now? Give your head a shake, Nan Yang."

Beyond the shop windows, the chaos of Ghost City ensued, in spite of the storm. He'd come to realise that ghosts treated everyday like it was a holiday. A celebration, with riots of colour and a cacophony of noise. Food, violence, passion, music. The full richness of life in the afterlife. So vibrant when pressed up against his own memories of his years wandering the earth. If he hadn't met San Lang, his life would still be muted greys and whites—death and meagre living. Barely living. Barely alive.

"Ah…I think…I think I'm going to go to bed." Xie Lian rose to his feet. Shi Qingxuan, Feng Xin and Mu Qing all followed suit. "I'm very tired, and it's late. I thank you very much for coming."

"Your Highness, of course." Feng Xin nodded, his eyes dark with worry. "You don't need to give me an answer tonight, but Jun Wu is waiting. He will be expecting to hear from you

soon.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Mu Qing hissed, but he, too, shot Xie Lian a worried look. There was something beneath it, though. Something that looked a little like relief. “He isn’t going to accept the offer. He’s going to wear himself to the ground worrying about some wrath ghost.”

Feng Xin’s face went bright red and he gritted his teeth. “Amazing how you know what His Highness will do better than anyone. You must know him so well.”

“Oh, and you think you know him so much better? I don’t see you spending all your free time with him, helping him out in his time of need.”

“Do you not see me standing here right fucking now?”

“I see you standing here like an idiot.” Mu Qing jabbed an elegant finger into Feng Xin’s chest. “If you’re so loyal to His Highness, why did you never think to appoint him?”

It was exactly what San Lang had said last night, and intrusive thoughts of San Lang’s smile dissolving to ash, San Lang facing down Bai Wuxiang, San Lang hurt and alone, flooded his mind.

“You think I didn’t want to appoint him? He never would have gone along with it!”

“Oh yeah? And why do you think the Heavenly Emperor is suddenly so keen on having him back in the heavens after all this time? Isn’t it a bit weird?”

A cold pit formed in Xie Lian’s belly.

“Of course not.” Feng Xin fisted his hands at his side, and Xie Lian worried it would come to blows. Again. The thought overwhelmed him. “His Highness has always been Jun Wu’s favourite.”

Mu Qing tossed his long ponytail behind his shoulder. “Half-wit. Look closely! Or do you always just do exactly as you’re told without asking questions? Because if you opened your eyes, you would see that this whole situation is fucking suspicious. Why did the Emperor want to meet His Highness in the Gambler’s Den? Why hasn’t he offered aid to him sooner?”

“How the fuck should I know? He’s the Emperor! Why haven’t you offered him aid, Mu Qing? There. I asked a question.”

“Enough, enough.” Xie Lian raised his hands, and the two generals felt silent. He sighed. “I am grateful to you both. Truly. But I really am very tired. Maybe we could talk more tomorrow?”

The two generals glared at each other, fury crackling in the air between them. The rain drummed the windows. The books whispered. The soft lantern light cast lacy patterns on the pocked wooden floors.

Feng Xin’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “Your Highness. I will call you in the morning.”

“Later.” Mu Qing lifted his chin, stomping to the front of the shop.

Feng Xin hesitated a moment, looking very much like he wanted to say more, but to Xie Lian’s relief, he followed after Mu Qing. A moment later, the shop bells chimed their departure.

“LianLian.” Qingxuan’s voice was soft. “Don’t mind them. They have another thousand years to go before they reach emotional maturity.”

Despite the burning in his belly—despite the tears that pricked behind his eyes—Xie Lian couldn’t help but smile.

“Ah! Your Highness! What’s this?”

Shi Qingxuan pointed to his collar. Something sparkling had lodged in one of the holes of his knit sweater. Xie Lian frowned and fished it out from beneath the layers of clothing.

It was a ring. A ring he’d never seen before, threaded through a silver chain and hung around his neck. The ring appeared to be diamond, so bright and delicate, it took Xie Lian’s breath away. It hummed softly with an intensely evil and intensely gentle aura.

Xie Lian’s heart stuttered, and he took a shaky breath. He held the ring up at eye level with shaking hands.

“What is it?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“I—” Xie Lian’s voice cracked. He had not been wearing this ring when he went to bed last night. He’d only thrown the knit sweater over his sleep shirt when he woke up this morning and found San Lang gone. He hadn’t noticed it. “It’s…I don’t know…”

Shi Qingxuan’s brilliant eyes widened. In their female form, Xie Lian was of a height with them. It was easier to see the dancing blues and greens of their irises.

“Do you think it’s from your San Lang? It must be, right?”

Xie Lian swallowed, shaking down to his bones. He wrapped his fingers around the ring and closed his eyes, a melancholic ache blooming in his heart. “I believe so, yes.”

“You must be so tired. I’ll let you take your rest. Should I come back tomorrow?”

“Ah, I’m actually not going to sleep now.”

Shi Qingxuan cocked their head to the side, a mischievous gleam in their eyes. “Go on.”

“I’m going to the Gambler’s Den. To”—he paused and cleared his throat—“request an audience with Hua Cheng.”

Shi Qingxuan frowned but didn’t look particularly surprised. “You think”—they paused, biting their lip—“he might have your San Lang? Is this a rescue mission?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “No. I don’t think Hua Cheng has San Lang. I am hoping Hua Cheng will provide some answers.”

“Answers to what?”

“Like, if perhaps…he is cursed. If perhaps…someone has been impersonating him. But I will have to be cautious. Hopefully Hua Cheng doesn’t just take his chance and kill me.”

“So you plan to, what, waltz right into the Gambler’s Den and demand to speak with Ghost City’s Chengzhu?”

“I was hoping for a bit more stealth than that.” Xie Lian laughed awkwardly.

Shi Qingxuan snapped their fan closed with an eager grin. “A secret mission! Your Highness, you are my kind of crazy.”

Xie Lian laughed again and scratched the back of his head. “Thanks, I suppose.”

“I’m coming with you. Obviously.”

Xie Lian sighed. He’d expected this response from Qingxuan. “Obviously.”

Xie Lian unearthed two very plain masks from Gorgo's office, and they wended through the turbid streets of Ghost City. The rain beat down around them, but Xie Lian hardly noticed. He cupped the ring that hung around his neck, taking comfort in the icy coldness of it. San Lang had left this with him. Whatever it was—and he had his suspicions—he would guard it with his life and accept it into the vulnerable depths of his heart.

Xie Lian got them a bit lost a few times, but soon they stood in front of the infamous Gambler's Den.

"Mnm, it's just as I imagined it," Shi Qingxuan said from behind their mask. "Larger than life, grand with just a hint of gaudy. What a sight this is!"

"Ah, you've never been?"

"Are you kidding? Ha ha ha ha, Your Highness, who apart from you would accompany me to such a place? Ha ha ha ha!" They reached for the fan—a nervous habit—but then seemed to think better of it. "If only my brother could see me now. He would never have allowed me to come here."

Xie Lian didn't often hear Qingxuan mention their brother. Shi Wudu had been dead over a thousand years now, decapitated by a water demon, but he knew Qingxuan still grieved him.

"So, Your Highness. You mentioned something about stealth?"

It was in that moment Xie Lian noticed two ghosts dressed in the Gambler's Den uniform rushing in the rain toward a back entrance.

"Yes. I have an idea," Xie Lian said, taking Qingxuan by the hand.

It was surprisingly easy to infiltrate the Gambler's Den kitchens. Shi Qingxuan changed their outfits with the flick of their hand into the black robes of the workers. There was a bit of a spat between them about whether or not Xie Lian needed to disguise himself more *thoroughly* , but Xie Lian was nothing if not stubborn. He stuck to his guns. He didn't want to stand before Hua Cheng as anything other than his true self.

Xie Lian ignored the knots in his belly and his heart beat out of time as he and Qingxuan were foisted into the busy kitchen. There were at least a hundred workers carrying platters, chopping vegetables, labouring over oddly bubbling pots. Chefs shouted orders, and the waitstaff laughed and gossiped.

"Why we is so busy anyways? No Chengzhu?" A pretty ghost with hair down to her feet leaned against the counter as she filled ramekins with bright yellow sauce. "Why we is so busy?"

"The promise of Chengzhu. That's why," a shorter ghost that looked a little like a cactus replied. "He's in the city, we know. Could show up at any moment. Will show up at any moment."

The pretty ghost sighed, her overly full red lips pulled into a pout. "I has nuthin pretty to look at tonight. I hope he's come in just so I can stare."

"I don't. I gotta get outta here early tonight. Things to do."

"Outta the way!" a towering ghost with webbed gills shouted as he shoved by Xie Lian.

"Ah, sorry! Sorry!" Xie Lian squeaked as he stumbled back into Shi Qingxuan.

"Eh? Hua Cheng's not here?" Qingxuan whispered. "What should we do?"

"Ah, I will wait for him to make an appearance. But please, Qingxuan, don't feel obligated to stay. This might be dangerous."

Qingxuan sighed behind their mask. “I’m not going anywhere without you, LianLian. Bestest friends don’t let bestest friends break into ghost king lairs alone.”

Xie Lian smiled softly to himself, a strange warmth expanding in his chest. “Thank you, Qingxuan. If you ever need to break into a ghost king’s lair, I will be there by your side.”

Qingxuan grasped his masked chin between and cooed. “I will hold you to it! Ha ha ha ha, Your Highness, the things you say!”

A giant platter of food was thrust into Xie Lian’s hands and another into Shi Qingxuan’s hands.

“Do you need me to light a fire under your cute little ass?” a hairy green ghost in a chef’s hat barked at Xie Lian. “Get these out onto the floor!”

Ah, it had all been too easy. Nothing was ever this easy for him, was it? As Xie Lian followed Qingxuan out of the kitchens and into the busy corridor, his dread mounted. What if Hua Cheng didn’t come? What if he did?

San Lang.

San Lang.

His cellphone was heavy against his thing in his fake Gambler’s Den robes. He wanted to pull it out to see if he had a text from San Lang, but there was no opportunity, not with so many eyes in this place.

Seeing the Gambler’s Den from this perspective was surprisingly exciting. It truly was a marvel, so lively and with such edge. Shi Qingxuan wasn’t wrong—there was a hint of gaudiness to the decor—but it was marvellous all the same. And despite the gaudiness, it

possessed its own kind of elegance. So grand and rich and wild, all rich lacquered wood and crimson silks and gleaming white marble. Xie Lian couldn't help but feel pride. His Wu Ming. His Wu Ming had built this all from the ground up.

He choked back hot tears. Lethargic grief seeped from his heart—anticipatory grief. He'd lost so much in his too-long life. So much. It seemed it would happen again. Could everything really turn out all right? Would San Lang really be okay?

Was San Lang really Hua Cheng?

Could he really be?

They funnelled out onto the balcony of the grande hall—the hall where he had Jun Wu had met the other night. He saw the same waitress who had served them drinks, the same table where Jun Wu had made his proposal.

The den was at maximum capacity, filled to the brim with ghosts laughing and drinking and gambling away life and limb.

The golden steps leading up to the red curtain gleamed in the lantern light. The red curtain rippled, but Xie Lian could make out no figure behind it.

A lone figure passed right by Xie Lian. He was tall, with long black robes and a white smiling mask. His long brown hair was braided over his shoulder. He moved fluidly, but somehow had no presence at all—almost as if he wasn't really there. Xie Lian did a double take.

Silent Moon. It was Silent Moon. Xie Lian's heart was like a hummingbird. If he didn't calm down soon, he would keel over!

Silent Moon hadn't noticed Xie Lian or Shi Qingxuan. He moved with authority along the balcony, descending the stairs and commanding the staff, his hands clasped behind his back.

Xie Lian stopped a winged ghost hurrying by with a tray of empty glasses. “Excuse me, would you mind telling me who that is?” Xie Lian pointed to Silent Moon.

The ghost looked down at him as though he had three heads, although in Ghost City three heads wasn’t so far fetched.

“Huh? The Waning Moon Officer? That’s Hua Cheng’s right hand man. Is this some kind of joke?” They huffed and stomped off toward the back, muttering to themself.

The Waning Moon Officer. Not Silent Moon. The Waning Moon Officer. Hua Cheng’s right hand man who had, for some reason, been there to aid them after Hua Cheng’s attack alongside Gorgo. Who had, for some reason, lied about their real title.

Hope sparked in Xie Lian’s chest. He and Shi Qingxuan exchanged a glance and nodded.

They carried their trays down the staff stairs and into thongs of ghosts. It was stiflingly hot and humid, and the noise of the place rattled his ear drums. Xie Lian held his breath against the smell of blood and spice—of rancid meat and floral notes. He watched the door, waiting for Hua Cheng’s arrival.

Would he come?

His hands shook as he handed out dishes of food, his eyes constantly scanning the crowd. His scanning paused when he noticed three familiar figures. Sitting together near the main gambling table, were three poorly disguised Heavenly Officials. Feng Xin, Mu Qing, and the Earth Master Yi. They were bent close together, speaking in low tones.

Xie Lian approached, setting a plate of food before them each.

“...been missing since yesterday, creepy fuck. He looks at His Highness like he wants to devour him whole,” Feng Xin near-whispered.

“Oh yeah?” Ming Yi said, his face its own blank mask.

“But his boss, the ghost Gorgo, I trust him even less. He’s old as hell, and they call him the ‘Curse Collector’. He’s done some pretty fucked up shit—we are discovering more and more every day. But His Highness thinks the world of him, so we haven’t been able to—”

“We didn’t order these,” Mu Qing said as Xie Lian set the plate in front of him.

Xie Lian’s heart raced, his blood hurtling through his veins. He shrugged and was about to make off through the crowd when Shi Qingxuan appeared and dropped unceremoniously onto Earth Master Yi’s lap.

Earth Master Yi’s mouth fell open, his deep-blue eyes widening in shock. Shi Qingxuan put their arms around his neck and giggled. “Ming-xiong! What kind of disguise is that! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Ming Yi’s surprise morphed into a deep scowl, but he didn’t try to shove Shi Qingxuan off. In fact, he put his arms around them, his scowl deepening.

Both Mu Qing and Feng Xin were stunned into silence, but their gazes immediately shot suspiciously to Xie Lian.

“Fuck.” Feng Xin dropped his head into his hands. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“I should have known. Idiot.” Mu Qing glared at Xie Lian. “What the hell are you doing here? Do you have a death wish?”

“I—”

The Gambler's Den fell deathly silent—the kind of silent that screamed. Xie Lian's heart shuddered, and for a moment, he thought everyone had fallen silent because of the small collection of Heavenly Officials in the Gambler's Den, but no.

No.

Hua Cheng walked across the marble floors, his black boots jingling. The crowd of ghosts parted silently for him.

No one cheered. No one screamed. No one spoke a word.

It was uncannily different from the reception Hua Cheng had received on Xie Lian's first visit to the Gambler's Den, and tension hung in the air.

Xie Lian stood frozen. His body was simultaneously hot and cold, throbbing and empty.

Hua Cheng.

The Ghost King didn't speak a word. He signalled to his Waning Moon Officer who followed him up the gleaming golden steps. They disappeared behind the curtain.

The Gambler's Den had taken on a new, subdued quality. The crowd thinned a little, and the bets were tamer. The drinking and shouting restrained. The energy had been sucked out of the room.

"You should leave. Now." Ming Yi was looking straight at Xie Lian. His piercing blue eyes were…startlingly familiar.

Xie Lian shrugged. "I can't."

“Fucking leave. Now.” Ming Yi rose to his feet, nearly dumping Qingxuan onto the floor. “Go!”

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Ming-Xiong, what—”

The Waning Moon Officer appeared once more from behind the curtain. He descended the stairs, but instead of disappearing once more into the crowd, he walked directly toward Xie Lian, stopping only a few feet away. Xie Lian set down his tray.

The masked ghost bowed gently, his back ramrod straight. The mournful smiling mask hid his expression beneath.

“Honoured guest,” Waning Moon said, “our lord wishes for a private audience.”

Xie Lian’s mouth had gone dry. His fingertips tingled, and for a horrifying moment, he thought he might pass out. The Gambler’s Den had fallen into hushed whispers.

As he followed Silent Moon—The Waning Moon Officer—up the steps to the gauzy silk curtain, his heart whooshed in his ears.

San Lang.

San Lang.

Please be okay.

Wu Ming.

Hua Cheng.

San Lang.

The Waning Moon Officer parted the curtain but did not follow Xie Lian inside. He bowed once more and departed.

Xie Lian was alone for the second time with Hua Cheng.

The Supreme Ghost King sat leisurely on a wooden dais, long legs sprawled out in front of him. His raven-feather hair hung in chaotic waves around his shoulders and down his back, and a single braid swung at his collar bones, adored with a red coral bead. He looked young. Maybe 22 or 23, though the black eyepatch made him look older.

But it wasn't his beauty that struck Xie Lian in the heart. It was how startlingly similar he looked like San Lang.

The point of his chin.

His glittering onyx eye.

The curve of his pretty mouth.

Along his collar bone, he wore a delicate silver butterfly necklace—the very one Xie Lian had given him at the Ghost City market.

Xie Lian opened his mouth to speak, but Hua Cheng rose to his feet, his single black eye wide with wonder. He moved slowly toward Xie Lian, as though afraid of frightening him off. He towered over Xie Lian. Taller even than San Lang, and just as intimidating. Just as beautiful. Just as beloved.

“Gege…” Hua Cheng whispered reverently in San Lang’s voice.

Beware My River's Undertow

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much again for all your wonderful comments and heckling! You give me so much courage and inspiration! I just adore you all!

Ah...so...um...please still love me after this chapter?? DON'T FORGET, I PROMISE A HAPPY ENDING! Also, also, I weave some canon dialogue in. A sprinkling here and there. :) Okay, okay. Here we go.

This chapter has some pretty serious CW and TWs. I am putting them at the end as they are spoilery, but please please, if you are concerned, I urge you to have a look. I have updated the main tags just in case you'd like to have a look there, too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Gege…” Hua Cheng whispered reverently in San Lang’s voice.

A tremor went through Xie Lian as he stared into the abyss of Hua Cheng’s shadowy eye. His heart beat like the tide, slowly eroding his ribcage.

The curtain rustled softly behind him, and the din of the Gambler’s Den fell away. Xie Lian removed his mask, and it clattered on the wood floor at their feet.

Hua Cheng took a step closer, his face lit by soft crimson lantern light. He looked like San Lang, but not. His jaw was sharper, his ears pointed, his hair longer and thicker, but just as luscious and black. But his black eye, the one not covered by an eyepatch, was San Lang’s eye.

“Gege…” Hua Cheng’s voice was so filled with longing, Xie Lian could not hold back the rush of emotion. Tears pricked his eyes, and his body throbbed with grief. Energy wavered in the air between them, sparking and fizzing. Time slowed, syrupy and languid.

“Is it—” Xie Lian swallowed, steadying his breath. Uncertainty expanded in his chest, crushing his lungs. It was too strange…too…wrong. “Is it you? Is it…”

Hua Cheng looked stricken. His black eye burned with emotion. He released a slow, shuddering breath. “I knew Gege would come. I’m sorry, I had to leave you. The curse forced me to leave you. It forced me to hurt you.”

“The…ah…the curse?” Xie Lian’s mind was reeling. Of course there had been a curse. He’d already known that. So why was San Lang permitted to mention it now? What had changed? What had forced him to leave?

Hua Chung’s brows were so black against his pearlescent skin, sharp like raven feathers. His long fan of lashes brushed his cheek. He was so beautiful. Eerily beautiful. Of course he was beautiful. He ran the pads of his fingers along Xie Lian’s cheekbone, tucking an escaped lock of hair behind his ear. Xie Lian shivered.

“Gege, I am so relieved you came. I will tell you everything now. I will tell you everything, my love.”

He pulled Xie Lian into his arms, and Xie Lian went willingly. The top of his head barely reached Hua Cheng’s chin in the form, and he was fully enveloped in the embrace—it had been a very different embrace the last time Hua Cheng held him close—and Xie Lian shuddered.

“Gege, Gege. I have hurt you so much. Please, forgive this lowly one…”

“San Lang, I don’t understand. Has the curse released you? Can you really tell me now?”

“Not yet. There is more to be done. Gege, I am so relieved you’re all right. I have been so worried.” Hua Cheng squeezed his eye shut and shook his head. “I won’t allow us to be parted again. Not ever again, Gege. My love. My prince.”

Something was wrong. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong. A chill went down his spine.

Hua Cheng curled a long slender finger under Xie Lian's chin and tilted his head up. He leaned down and pressed his lips to Xie Lian's. The kiss was hot—too hot. San Lang tongue was in his mouth, laving across the seam of his lips, his sharp canines catching. His arms tightened around Xie Lian like a cage, pulling them flush. He squeezed at Xie Lian's hips, and his waist, the other hand tangling in his hair. But it was wrong. It felt wrong.

Xie Lian nearly gagged at the sour taste of Hua Cheng's mouth, the acrid stench of his breath. Hua Cheng's kisses were not San Lang's. They moved against the current, devoid of gentleness, lacking in care. And his mouth was foul. The reek of rot permeated his skin.

The wrongness of it struck him in the chest.

San Lang wouldn't be kissing him right now. Not like this. Not in this new form with all this uncertainty. Not when Xie Lian was clearly terrified.

Xie Lian shoved away, gasping for air.

"You're not San Lang," he wheezed, his panic mounting to a fever pitch.

Hua Cheng smirked. "Ah, but I am your San Lang. Your Hua Cheng. Your Wu Ming. And here you are. In Ghost City. In my arms. My prettiest prey."

"You're not San Lang," he repeated, taking a step backward. But there was nowhere to run. This was Hua Cheng's Gambling Den. Hua Cheng's territory. And Xie Lian still had no idea where San Lang was. Terror lanced through him, chilling him to the core.

"Mnm, Gege. It's me. San Lang." He grinned wildly, such a beautiful, awful smile. "It's been me all along. I was the one making love to you last night. I was the one holding you while you slept. I was the one tricking you into falling in love with me. It was easy to do. Foolish

Gege. So easy. So, so easy. I have enjoyed our little game. Very much indeed. Just as I am enjoying breaking your heart in two."

Xie Lian's stomach plummeted, and he tasted bile on his tongue. Could it have been? Could it have been this creature he'd shared pleasure with in bed last night? Could this creature and San Lang be one and the same? "N-no. No. There are…someone…you're the other Hua Cheng. The wrong Hua Cheng! Where is San Lang?!"

Hua Cheng took Xie Lian's shaking hand in his. He kissed each of Xie Lian's fingertips before Xie Lian snatched his hand away.

"I allowed you to believe there were two of me," Hua Cheng said, "that someone was impersonating me. It was a convenient theory you came up with all on your own. It worked out well for me. In this form, I could torment you, and then you run right back into my arms so I could comfort you. Fucking you was a very nice bonus, I will admit. You are such an exquisite little thing."

Xie Lian's body reacted viscerally. He choked on bile, and his mind went black with disgust and terror. No. No. It wasn't true. This wasn't…it couldn't…

"I don't…I don't believe you," Xie Lian rasped, his whole body shaking. "You are not San Lang. You can't be."

Hua Cheng pouted and shifted into San Lang's form. Above their heads, the ghoulish red masks hanging from the rafters seem to laugh at them. "Gege, Gege, you can't just say it's not me! I am your San Lang! I will always be yours. Your most devoted believer."

He stood there before Xie Lian, his glossy black hair in a lopsided ponytail that Xie Lian had tied it in last night. His red and black eyes gleamed in the soft crimson light of the room behind the curtain. He wore the butterfly necklace at his clavicle. It glittered softly against his moon-pale skin, much like Hua Cheng's wraith butterflies.

"I thought this form might be more tempting for you, Gege. He's a little softer. A little younger. A little less frightening. Apparently you agreed."

Was it possible? Was it possible Xie Lian had been so starved for touch, so starved for love, that he'd ignored every warning? San Lang had flower and butterfly tattoos. Xie Lian had noticed them immediately, on the very first day they'd met—of course he had. And San Lang always wore red. Just like the Crimson Rain Sought Flower. San Lang had a wealth of knowledge that no mortal should rightly have, including knowledge of the Flower Crowned Martial God. Certainly, certainly.

But as time wore on, it began to feel more and more like a cry. Like a prayer. Like San Lang was trying to show him who he was in the only ways he could. And Xie Lian had watched carefully, trying to assess the clues judiciously without jumping to conclusions, all the while melting into San Lang's care and devotion.

Could that gentleness—that devotion—be faked? Could the soulfulness in San Lang's eyes be faked?

His Highness will always be His Highness.

Xie Lian shook his head, his tumultuous thoughts frothing in his mind. No. He would know San Lang anywhere, and this creature was not him. The love in San Lang's eyes, his care, his tenderness—it was real. It couldn't possibly have been this creature in bed with him, with the acrid breath and vile taste. San Lang tasted sweet. San Lang smelled of flowers and rain. San Lang filled the empty spaces in his body with peace.

Everyone left. Everyone always left. But not San Lang.

Wu Ming sacrificed himself for Xie Lian's mistakes rather than allow him to be hurt. Hong'er had died for his god in an insensible war. San Lang had shown him love when all he'd ever known was indifference.

Everyone left, but not San Lang.

And all it takes is one person. One person is enough.

“Gege, gege! You still don’t believe me, do you? I see the wheels turning in that pretty head of yours.” The creature wearing San Lang’s skin clasped its hands behind its back. “What can this San Lang do to convince his Gege, hmn? Perhaps more kissing will satisfy your curiosity? Or would you like me to die for you again? That is usually your preference.”

Xie Lian allowed a tear to escape down his cheek. Emotion was heavy in his body, weighing down his limbs. “Why, then? Why go through all of this? Why trick me into falling in love with you when you could have just killed me?”

Hua Cheng laughed. “Why? Because I could? Or because I needed you to understand that you are alone. No one will help you. No one will ever help you. But you never learn, do you, Xie Lian. You just never. Fucking. Learn.” He closed his hand, and when he opened it again, he was cupping a white flower in his long, slender fingers. “The flowers I’ve offered you, their only task was to decay. You never understood that part.”

You never learn.

You never learn.

You never learn.

The words rang in his head like a cannonade, metallic and sharp.

“Xianle, you never learn, do you?” Jun Wu had said.

Xie Lian clenched his fists at his side, terror rising inside him. “The flower was a gift of devotion from Wu Ming. My crimes against him are egregious, but I don’t owe you an explanation for that. I owe it to Wu Ming. Where is he? Where is San Lang? The real Hua Cheng? What have you done to him?”

“I was your last believer, Gege,” the creature in front of him continued, “and you killed me because you couldn’t do the job yourself.”

“You’ve obviously been watching us,” Xie Lian said, ignoring the creature’s attempt to rile him. “You’ve obviously been watching San Lang to mimic him so accurately. You’re even wearing the necklace I gave him. Did you think that would be enough to fool me?”

The creature laughed, such a rich and beautiful laugh. A beloved laugh. But it was wrong. So wrong. It burned Xie Lian from the inside out.

“I know who you are.” The words fell from Xie Lian’s mouth—discarded, dead things.

The creature stared at him for a long moment, the smile never once falling from its beautiful, beloved face. It shifted forms once more, and Xie Lian gasped. Before him stood a figure in white funeral robes, its long dark hair falling down its back in heavy chestnut waves. It was skinny, its collar bones jutting out, but its limbs were long and graceful. Like a dancer. It wore a mask that didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Xie Lian reached out in fury and ripped the mask away. When he saw what was underneath, he gasped and stumbled backward.

It was Xie Lian’s own face staring back at him: his own sharp chin, his own high cheekbones and too-large golden eyes, his own defiant expression. He wore a white bandage around his neck, and Ruoye shot out of his sleeve in impressive spirals, poised like a snake ready to strike. The white silk seemed to be appraising its twin around not-Xie Lian’s neck.

“Very good. Who am I, Your Highness?” the figure said in Xie Lian’s own voice, its lips twisting cruelly. Xie Lian wondered if that’s how he had appeared to Wu Ming. His heart trembled. He had to look away from the most haunting face he knew.

San Lang.

San Lang.

He needed to find him.

San Lang.

“Your San Lang came here early this morning to wait for you. To greet you as Hua Cheng, Supreme Ghost King. I suppose that means he was fairly certain you’d figured it out. He had not expected me to be waiting for him. I wore this form, too! He was quite angry about that.” Not-Xie Lian laughed awkwardly, scratching his pale cheek with long fingers.

“What did you do to him?” Xie Lian couldn’t keep the hysteria from his tone. “Where is he?”

“No need to worry, Your Highness. He’s somewhere familiar. Waiting for you. He won’t be bothering us.”

“If you hurt him, I will end you.”

The creature laughed. A soft laugh, Xie Lian’s own laugh. So gentle, like chimes. “How arrogant. You have forgotten my first lesson, Your Highness.”

“What lesson?”

“That you are powerless in the face of many things in this world.”

“You assumed a ghost king’s identity for 2000 years just to make sure I haven’t been negligent in my studies?” Xie Lian said through gritted teeth.

His phone vibrated at his thigh. Could it be San Lang? His heart thundered in his ears. Was this creature lying to him? Was San Lang somewhere safe?

"The opportunity presented itself and I took it. 2000 years ago, your Wu Ming, freshly out of the kiln, was all too willing to surrender himself when I told him you were in trouble. He should have played his cards closer, but after he killed those 33 Heavenly Officials, it wasn't difficult to guess his true identity. You can't really blame me for taking advantage of the situation, can you, Xie Lian?"

"What…what do you mean after he killed those 33 officials?"

"You still don't know who those gods were?"

"I…didn't recognise their names."

The creature laughed. "Their names were of little importance. They were the 33 officials from the middle court who chased you off that scrap of sacred land. Your Wu Ming had a score to settle, and he did it with style. I like that."

Xie Lian's mouth went dry. It was all too much. It was bigger than his thoughts. "I—"

"Your Wu Ming couldn't bear to see you brought so low. When he emerged from the kiln a supreme ghost king, it was his first order of business. He challenged Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen, too, if you recall. Xuan Zhen who was there to witness the bullying and did nothing, and Nan Yang, your sworn bodyguard, who abandoned you when you needed him most—both of them climbing over your back to achieve godhood. Or have you forgotten their crimes against you, Xie Lian? Have you forgotten? How your parents left you, how your people treated you, how your worshippers betrayed you? So forgiving. So kind. So understanding. Pathetic."

"How…how did you curse San Lang? What did you do to him?"

Not-Xie Lian smiled sweetly. His cheek dimpled, his expression soft. “I borrowed a curse from your boss, Gorgo. The infamous Curse Collector, and perhaps the oldest ghost in existence. He hadn’t the slightest clue who I was or what I would do, and he has now spent thousands of years atoning for his foolishness.”

Xie Lian sucked in a breath. “Gorgo?”

Not-Xie Lian nodded. “Hua Cheng handed E-Ming into my possession, and in doing so, accepted the curse unto himself. And to anyone who knew what was happening. His Waning Moon Officer, for example. Or Gorgo. Or that other ghost king. The curse prevented them from sharing what they knew or hinting to anyone, especially you, the truth of your San Lang’s identity. I could do as I wished and their hands were tied. The residents of Ghost City are yet unaware that someone has been impersonating their Chengzhu, but they can feel something is wrong, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. Their Chengzhu’s aura is quite distinct. I won’t deny I am impressed.”

“So it was the real Hua Cheng here in the Gambler’s Den the day I was here with the Emperor?” *With you* , he wanted to say, but he couldn’t be completely sure. Not yet. “Was it San Lang in his true form?”

“Correct.”

Xie Lian’s mind was a maelstrom of clues and secrets. “He…San Lang…handed E-Ming to you willingly? In exchange for what?”

“In exchange for you, Xie Lian.”

“What the hell does that mean? In exchange for me how? This was 2000 years ago, and San Lang only found me last year!” Xie Lian seethed. His ears rang, and his teeth ached with fury. Sweat dampened his sides. He wanted this creature to give him more information—but what if San Lang was in trouble? What if he was hurt…or worse?

No.

No, he couldn't allow his mind to wander. He needed to focus. Remain calm.

Not-Xie Lian tilted his head, his fine brows shooting up. "Such a temper, Your Highness. I don't particularly care for your tone."

"Why—" Xie Lian's voice cracked. "Why do you cling to me? What do you want?"

Not-Xie Lian took a step closer, his wide golden eyes shining. He held out a delicate hand. "What do I want? I want you to come to my side. I have waited so very long, Xie Lian. Join me."

Anger burned in his veins. Rage of the purest kind. "You disgust me. I will never join your side."

"You should know by now, Xie Lian. If you don't come to my side, then you will never win against me, and I will always defeat you. All that you have endured, all of my teachings, should have hardened you. Instead you have grown soft. Weak. It's pathetic. You will need to be disciplined. You will need to make the right choice. The same choice I made."

"You're mad," Xie Lian said, though his thoughts were racing, trying to think of a way out of this—a way to find San Lang. The creature before him—who was most certainly White No-Face—had said San Lang was somewhere familiar. What did that mean? Cold fear pitted in his belly, terror wrapping around his throat.

The necklace hummed at his chest, and he took a slow breath to steady himself.

"Xie Lian, beware my river's undertow. I may look delicate. I may look kind"—his golden gaze softened, his long black lashes fluttering—"but millennia's worth of vengeance roars within me. I have taken the utmost care in teaching you, and my patience is worn thin. You will join my side, or you will join him. Until you've learned your lesson."

Join him? Join him where?

Somewhere familiar.

San Lang was trapped somewhere familiar.

"Let me out! Your Highness, please! Someone let me out of here!"

San Lang's sleeping cries whispered in the back of Xie Lian's mind.

"Let me out! Mother! Your Highness! Ju Wu, you fucker!"

"Gege, it is a heavy curse…"

Xie Lian gasped for breath, his nails slicing into his palms. The thought of San Lang calling out for his mother, for him, shook him. It reached down into the wild and tangled recesses of his heart and squeezed.

"Xianle, you never learn, do you?"

"You never learn."

"You just never. Fucking. Learn."

"Fuck you," Xie Lian said softly.

"What did you say?" White No-Face's voice was low and terrifying.

“You didn’t hear me? Then I’ll say it again. Fuck you!” Xie Lian flowed like water, fluid and powerful, and he kicked Not-Xie Lian with such violence, he went flying down the steps of the Gambler’s Den.

Xie Lian stood at the top of the golden steps, chaos unfurling in every corner of the hall. Ghosts howled and hissed, claws out, and the room darkened with sinister energy as every last ghost retreated.

“Your Highness!” Feng Xin and Mu Qing ran to Not-Xie Lian’s side, helping him up. When they saw the real Xie Lian standing at the top of the golden steps, they paled.

A few paces away, Ming Yi held a struggling Shi Qingxuan in his arms.

“Your Highness!” the Wind Master cried, elbowing Ming Yi in the gut, but he didn’t let them go.

“Don’t. Move,” Ming Yi hissed, panic in the ocean depths of his eyes. “Unless you want to be killed.”

Rage and terror coursed through Xie Lian, bubbling up in his chest and curdling in his throat. Ruoye whipped around him like a skinny white dragon, whipping through his hair. Xie Lian had no spiritual power—or rather, it was locked away beneath his cursed shackles—and yet phantom energy crackled in his fingertips and hummed beneath his skin.

“Where is San Lang?” he roared, shaking the entire den. “Where is he?”

Not-Xie Lian flipped easily to his feet on the Gambler’s Den floor, shoving Mu Qing and Feng Xin aside. He shifted back into San Lang’s form, brandishing E-Ming who had materialised in his hand.

“I fucking KNEW it!” Feng Xin howled, and lunged at the creature wearing San Lang’s appearance.

Mu Qing leapt at him from the other side, consumed by a wild fury.

With the flick of his wrist, Bai Wuxiang sent Feng Xin and Mu Qing flying across the Den in opposite directions. Feng Xin crashed into one of the gambling tables, sending splinters of wood and tokens flying. Ghosts screamed and fell back. Mu Qing hit one of the marble columns and slid gracelessly to the floor, moaning.

Xie Lian launched down the stairs, torpedoing through the air. He smashed into the floor where Bai Wuxiang had just been standing. The first kick had been a surprise, but fighting Bai Wuxiang would not be so easy now. He wanted to collapse to the ground, to scream and yell, but he forced himself to hold it in.

The creature wearing San Lang’s beautiful face sank into an attack stance. “Stupid, ignorant child! You will obey me! You will come to my side!”

“I won’t!” Xie Lian seethed. He had no weapon, no spiritual powers. There was no way he could win this, but he would fight until he could fight no longer.

Gorgo appeared at Ming Yi’s side. Gorgo. The Curse Collector. He met Xie Lian’s gaze, something dark crossing his now black eyes. Then, nodding, he grabbed Shi Qingxuan with a force one would not expect of such a petite and young-looking man, and took off running.

In that moment, Ming Yi shifted. He grew taller, broader, his black hair lengthening. His skin draining of colour. Before Xie Lian’s eyes, Ming Yi took He Xuan’s form.

“Your Highness!” He Xuan shouted. “Run!”

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t run. Not when San Lang was trapped somewhere.

“My, my,” the creature said, swinging E-Ming from one side to the other. The cursed scimitar rattled and its red eye shed bright, bloody tears. “The other ghost king. Black Water Sinking Ships. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Ah. He Xuan was Black Water Sinking Ships. That made sense, Xie Lian supposed.

“Yeah, whatever,” He Xuan said, and his eyes darted back to Xie Lian. Water pooled on the floor at his feet, and the air was thick with sea salt. “Your Highness, Hua Cheng would want you to run. So fucking run!”

“What the fuck? What the actual fuck?” Feng Xin shouted, pulling himself from the wreckage of the collapsed gambling table. Mu Qing could only stand staring, his zhanmadao in hand, ready to fight.

Not-San Lang laughed, and the velvety sound sent a shiver through Xie Lian. “Surely you must know, Black Water. It’s much too late for that. His Highness is mine now, to do with as I please. And, oh. It pleases me.”

A wave of killing intent hit Xie Lian with the force of a typhoon. Bai Wuxiang unleashed the cursed scimitar E-Ming on him. The scimitar was incredibly fast and precise, but Xie Lian was skilled in the art of catching blades with his bare hands. He flicked the potentially lethal blow away, leaving his arm numb and tingling.

Bai Wuxiang lunged at him again, and Xie Lian dodged just in time. The creature's Converse clad foot cracked into the Gambler’s Den floor, sending shards of wood raining down around them.

“Nice form, Xie Lian. Well done!”

Xie Lian was not so lucky the third time. The collision was incredibly brutal, Bai Wuxiang’s kick knocking the air from his lungs. He blinked his eyes open to see the Gambler’s Den

roof. He choked on mouthfuls of blood, and his ears rang. He sprang to his feet, bracing himself, in time to see Bai Wuxiang fending off Black Water, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing.

Feng Xin lobbed spiritual arrows at him, while Mu Qing slashed at him with his sabre. He Xuan, or Black Water rather, sent blasts of spiritual energy, the likes of which Xie Lian had never seen.

But they were no match for Bai Wuxiang, and within minutes he had them lying on the ground, bleeding. He turned back to Xie Lian. His silky black hair had slipped from his tie and billowed around him. His crimson eye glowed with sinister intent.

“Xie Lian, fucking run! He’s insane!” Mu Qing shouted. He’d gone very pale, blood gushing from his nose and mouth.

“Enough!” the creature shouted. “I have exhausted all of my patience and tolerance on you for the past 2000, Your Highness. Yet you remain stubborn, capricious, unheeding of my every word!”

“Where is San Lang!?” Xie Lian couldn’t control his shaking or his rage.

Bai Wuxiang sneered. “Did you San Lang tell you he’d never leave you? My most faithful believers, my dearest friends—they all told me the same once. None of them was able to do as they promised. Come to my side at once.”

“Where. Is. San. Lang?” Xie Lian reinforced his stance and waited for Bai Wuxiang to attack once more.

With fluid motion, Bai Wuxiang shot toward him, but something peculiar happened. The cursed scimitar in his grip shuddered, its red eye rolling. It flipped out of Bai Wuxiang’s hand.

And into Xie Lian’s.

The scimitar rattled in his grip, shaking and purring, and Xie Lian smiled.

This was a piece of San Lang. His red eye, immortalised in his spiritual weapon.

The ring at Xie Lian's chest hummed.

Xie Lian sank lower into his stance, his body coiling with potential energy. When he sprang forth, whipping and dodging Bai Wuxiang's blasts of power, his intent was focussed.

He saw an opening. He raised E-Ming, ready to bisect the demon wearing San Lang's face.

But in the last moment, San Lang's eyes widened—flame and shadow. "Gege," he whispered, his voice filled with worship and awe.

It was enough to take Xie Lian by surprise, and at the last moment, he hesitated. The creature kicked him across the room. He hit the stairs hard, and bright lights exploded behind his eyes.

Bai Wuxiang cackled maniacally, shifting into a tall figure clad in white funeral robes. He wore a half-smiling, half-crying mask.

"Your Highness!' Mu Qing and Feng Xin screamed.

"Foolish child. Now you will join him!" Bai Wuxiang said, his voice coming from everywhere.

Bai Wuxiang raised his foot over Xie Lian's head and brought it down in one swift motion. Xie Lian teeth gnashed together, and he tasted blood. And the world went dark.

~~~~

Xie Lian woke up in the coffin.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Canon-typical violence. Mild gore. This next one is tricky to tag, but it could be considered a non-con kiss in the sense that it couldn't possibly have been consented to. It is two paragraphs. If you would like to skip, stop reading at "Hua Cheng curled a long slender finger under Xie Lian's chin.." It goes for five mini paragraphs/sections. You can begin reading again at, "You're not San Lang."

There is also some sexually abusive dialogue. One line. When you get to the paragraph beginning with "I allowed you to believe there were two of me," skip the last two sentences and move to the next paragraph.

Please take care of yourself, my loves. You are wonderful.
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Begin Again

Chapter Notes

Hello friends! This was supposed to be posted Tuesday. Then Wednesday. But instead of polishing it all up, I chose the delirium of cold medicine. I'm sorry. Ah, but here it is! Thank you all so much for your wonderful heckling! Do you know how much I freaking love you all? Sometimes your comments make me cry so hard, I blow snot bubbles! Okay, that's what you do to me!

Two chapters left after this, and they will both be up next week. I want to write something else. Something reaaaally dark and angsty. I take plot bunny requests. ha ha.

Thank you for coming along on the journey with me! I treasure you all! *sobs*

Was this really happening?

Granules of dirt embedded beneath his fingernails, earth compacted down his throat. Pressure built in his ears. Humming. Vibrations through his bones—through the earth surrounding his coffin, shaking loose reams of centipedes and spiders.

The walls of the coffin pressed in on him, invisible but weighty. It had been 100 years since he’d taken a breath, and his lungs were dried husks, collapsed and dusty. His moments of life were fleeting—bright hot pain and suffocation interrupted by dragging hours of sucking death.

“Gege…hold still…”

And he was alone, alone, alone.

Darkness again, then a spark of consciousness as his heart slipped over a new beat and jerked violently around the dowel.

“Gege! I’m going to try to pull it out!”

The humming bothered his ears—ached between his teeth—but it was fine. Only seconds remained. He would be dead again in a moment. Xie Lian’s heart shuddered and thrashed. Hot blood flooded beneath his red-lacquered robes, pooling along his clavicle—along the pale pillar of his neck. Drops of blood shivered and jumped at his pulse points.

“Gege, Gege, shhhh! I’ve got you!”

Xie Lian turned his head.

Wu Ming lay beside him in the coffin, his crescent-eyed smile ghostly in the heavy darkness.

"Taizi Dianxia, it is a heavy curse."

Wu Ming's voice was a whisper in his ears. His eyes were vacant behind his mask. Empty and useeing.

There was a thudding on the roof of the coffin. Crack. Thud. Crack. Wu Ming stared at him from behind the smiling mask.

"Brace yourself, Gege. Cry out if it hurts!"

Excruciating pain lanced through his heart, lightning behind his eyes and through his veins. Xie Lian's body jerked, and his eyes snapped open. Silence muffled his ears. The thudding on the top of the coffin was absorbed into the darkness, echoing down a tunnel as the nightmare receded.

Blood gurgled in his throat, trickled down his chin, and he gagged—hot blood pulsed from a wound in his chest.

"I've got you, I've got you. It's out now, Your Highness. It's out."

Was this really happening?

The heady bouquet of loamy earth and blood smothered him, and his hands, shot out of their own volition—they met with wood. The thud echoed in his ears like the dream. The hot tang of blood was suffocating him.

He was in the coffin.

It hadn't been a dream.

It was real.

A strangled sob escaped his lips and he beat feebly at the wood mere inches from his face, gasping for air, his heart thrashing his ribcage. Panic rose inside him, bubbling up, frothing beneath his tongue.

Gentle hands, slick with blood, grasped him. Held him firmly. Long fingers threaded with his and squeezed. “Gege, Gege, shhhhh, I’ve got you. I’ve got you. You’re okay. The dowel is out.”

Xie Lian gasped, clinging to those hands with the force of all his terror. He blinked and blinked into the darkness, heaving and gulping mouthfuls of foetid air.

He was back in the coffin.

He was in the coffin.

He was trapped in the boundless darkness of eternity.

He was in the coffin.

“San Lang!” His voice was too loud, too shrill for the enclosed space, but his heart was running away and he couldn’t get enough air. He trembled, pressing himself into the blissful coolness of San Lang’s embrace. His head throbbed, and every beat of his injured heart was agony.

“Gege, don’t be afraid.”

Silver sparked at the corner of Xie Lian’s eye. A glimmer in the dark. His eyes fluttered closed, and when they opened again, a kaleidoscope of silver wraith butterflies hovered above him, and he gasped.

Hua Cheng’s silver butterflies.

He could see now. The front of his white Henley was torn open—stained dark with shimmering blood. The butterflies settled onto the wound. His skin itched and burned as spiritual energy flooded him, a warm wash, knitting him back together. Xie Lian could only watch in a daze. Heavy breathing rasped in his ears, and it took him a moment to realise it was his own breathing. Once the delicate creatures finished their job, they winked out one-by-one, casting them into darkness once more.

"San Lang!" He panted and choked, his body breaking into shivers.

"You're safe. I've got you." San Lang pulled Xie Lian into his chest, carding long fingers through his hair. "Shhh, Gege, Gege."

It was only then Xie Lian's thoughts caught up to him. Memories flooded his mind: Bai Wuxiang wearing San Lang's face. The Gambler's Den in chaos. The half-smiling, half-crying mask.

"No need to worry, Your Highness. He's somewhere familiar. Waiting for you."

"No…no!" Xie Lian's breath hitching in panic. He ran his shaking hands over San Lang's chest, over his throat and jaw, his cheek bones, searching for any injury. His fingers snagged on the strap of an eye patch. That was okay. He'd expected it to be there. San Lang's jaw was sharper, too. His hair thicker. Longer. Xie Lian could also sense that San Lang was taller, broader. "Is it really you? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine." San Lang pulled Xie Lian back against his chest.

Xie Lian shook with silent tears. It wasn't himself he was worried about. He clung to the fabric of San Lang's blood-drenched coat. With slow, shuddering breaths, Xie Lian calmed his breathing as San Lang continued to run fingers through his hair, gently scratching his scalp. San Lang's touch, his smell, it was enough to ground him. To keep him in the moment. He squeezed his eyes shut against the darkness of the coffin and tried to imagine they were in their beds in Ghost City, wrapped in each other's arms because they wanted to be close instead of out of necessity.

“I’m all right now, San Lang. I’m all right.” Xie Lian took a shuddering breath. “Or should I call you Hua Cheng now?”

Silence. The silence of an eternity in darkness. Xie Lian’s heart began to race again as fear brushed against the base of his skull—fear that San Lang wasn’t really here. That he’d imagined him in his state of delirium.

“If it’s all right with Gege, I’d prefer he still calls me San Lang.”

“San Lang. Is the curse broken now? It must be.”

“En. Gege retrieved E-Ming. The curse is broken.”

It was only then Xie Lian felt a rattling at his side, and a strange chirring filled the coffin. Xie Lian reached down and ran his fingers along the cold hilt of a blade.

“E-Ming,” Xie Lian whispered. “Hello.”

The scimitar rattled even harder, and San Lang sighed. “How long has Gege known?”

“Ah. I suspected for a while.”

“Gege is so clever. Of course he figured it out.”

“San Lang, I was so worried. I didn’t know where you’d gone. I went to the Gambler’s Den to find you…ah….aha…to find Hua Cheng, but Bai Wuxiang was waiting for me. Wearing your face.”

“Did he touch you?”

“He was pretending to be San Lang, and he was wearing the butterfly necklace I gave you, so for a moment I was confused. He”—Xie Lian took a shuddering breath—“kissed me.”

San Lang's howl of fury caught Xie Lian off guard, and he flinched, goosebumps covering his spine and ribs.

Now San Lang was gasping for breath. He held on to Xie Lian impossibly tight. “Sorry, Gege.” His voice was ruined with rage. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I lost myself for a moment.”

Xie Lian shook his head, his belly burning. He swallowed back a mournful wail. “I’m not afraid, San Lang. Not of you. Never of you.”

“That trash is going to pay. I will fucking end him for touching you!”

“I knew almost right away he wasn’t you. I was only confused when…well, somehow… somehow he knew that you and I had been”—despite his panic, despite his grief, his face flushed hot—“intimate. He tried to use it against me.”

San Lang growled. “Did he now."

"San Lang, how could he have known we'd been intimate? I thought Gorgo had warded the shop."

"When I arrived, he looked just like you, in full god-pleasing regalia. It took me by surprise. He used E-Ming to”—he paused—“extract details.”

“He hurt you.” Anger simmered in Xie Lian’s blood. His nails dug into the palms of his hands.

“He doesn’t have the power to hurt me. He had to get rid of me quickly, because E-Ming was trying to come back.”

“Ah, your spiritual weapon doesn’t seem to like Bai Wuxiang very much. Such a good scimitar. So cute, too! And so helpful! It flew right into my hand!”

E-Ming rattled and chirred, and Xie Lian stroked the pommel.

“Gege, you’ll spoil that useless piece of trash.”

“Ah, San Lang! E-Ming isn’t useless! How could you say such a thing?”

“It hurt you, Your Highness. Useless.”

“No. Bai Wuxiang hurt me. E-Ming is an innocent victim of his actions.”

As Xie Lian shifted, something hard dug into his ribs. He grasped the slick object in his hand. Wooden. Rounded top. Sharp end. It was hot, and as Xie Lian explored it with his fingers, his ears rang.

“Gege, don’t touch that. Throw it down. That thing is no good.”

Xie Lian dropped it, a chill running down his spine. It clattered on the wood floor of the coffin. “Is it—" Xie Lian swallowed. "Is it the one Lang Qianqiu used to keep me in the coffin? It is, isn’t it.”

Silence.

“Ah, San Lang knew about the coffin then, too. I wondered.”

San Lang was quiet for so long, Xie Lian wasn't sure he would answer. "I knew, yes."

"You know everything about everything, don't you? How did San Lang know about my time in the coffin?" His voice shook. He was terrified of the answer, but he needed to know. He needed to know what happened. He knew the truth would rip him to shred, but only once it had all been revealed could they begin to heal. Together. "Bai Wuxiang said you surrendered yourself when you heard I was in trouble."

San Lang pressed a cool kiss to his temple, and Xie Lian shivered, pressing closer. "Gege…" He took a slow breath he didn't need. "After I emerged from Mount Tonglu, I searched for you. For centuries. There had been no word of you, no sightings. It was as though you'd disappeared. I grew…desperate."

Xie Lian buried his face in San Lang's chest, shivering as the beautiful ghost ran his fingers up and down his spine. "I see. Go on."

"While I searched, I set to work on establishing Ghost City. That's where Bai Wuxiang found me. He knew who I was…that I was the ghost fire in the temple. That I was your nameless ghost, Wu Ming. He knew I was looking for you—that I wanted to find you, protect you."

Xie Lian shivered.

"He stood before me in the Gambler's Den and told me you were in trouble. That you were suffering terribly. That you were buried in a coffin and had been for 100 years with a dowel through your heart. Gege, you have to know, I lost my mind. I wasn't thinking clearly. I could only focus on your suffering. So when that fuck wad offered me a deal, I took it without hesitation."

"What did…what did he offer?" Xie Lian already knew, ah, he already knew. He was shaking again, so hard his teeth chattered. He already knew, and it was unbearable. "Please, San Lang, Hua Cheng. What deal did you take?"

San Lang sighed. “He said, if I gave him E-Ming, he would allow me to trade you places.”

Xie Lian squeezed his eyes shut, his darkest fears confirmed. His heart throbbed. He couldn’t catch his breath—he was drowning in horror, in grief.

“It was my honour.” San Lang’s voice was rough. Grief stricken. “It was my privilege to come to your aid, Your Highness. To save you. I couldn’t bear—”

“How long?” Xie Lian wailed into San Lang’s chest. “How long were you in the coffin?”

“Not nearly as long as His Highness. Only about 40 years. But by the time I fought my way out, it was too late. Jun Wu had taken you back to the Heavens to recover. And then you disappeared again.”

“And E-Ming?”

“When I handed my spiritual weapon to Bai Wuxiang, I unknowingly accepted the curse unto myself. Bai Wuxiang had free access to my identity. He could assume my appearance, sit in my seat of power, command my cursed scimitar. I was at his mercy. But what was worse, so were you. By the time I realised the depths of my mistake, he was already chasing you through time, dogging your every step, destroying the things you cared about, all in my name. And you didn’t even know why.”

Xie Lian swallowed back tears, trying to calm his breath. “I suspected you were from Xianle. That you sought vengeance.”

“I am. And I do. I will make that pathetic creature beg for death after what he’s done to His Highness.”

“Ah, San Lang. You truly are my most devoted believer. May I….may I see you? May I see your face?”

“Your Highness…Why would you want to see the face of the ghost who has been stalking you for 2000 years?”

“Because it’s you. I want to see the face of my Wu Ming. My Hong’er. Won’t San Lang fulfil my wish?”

San Lang sucked in a breath. After a moment, silver wraith butterflies escaped his silver vambraces once more, filling the enclosed space.

The silvery glow painted San Lang’s face incandescent. San Lang. Hua Cheng. Terrifyingly beautiful. Ethereal. His raven feather hair was tangled in the strap of his black eyepatch. It was the same shimmering black eye that looked back at him. The crimson one was obviously long gone.

“Was this the face beneath the smiling mask?” Xie Lian whispered, reaching out to run his fingers along Hua Cheng’s fine high cheekbones.

Hua Cheng swallowed heavily. “I hadn’t lost my eye yet. But yes. This is the face of your Wu Ming.”

His Wu Ming.

His most faithful believer.

The ghost who had suffered his cruelty. The ghost who suffered the consequences of his selfish mistakes.

“I abused you.” Tears tracked down Xie Lian’s cheeks, hot and salty. “And you gave your life for me. Twice.”

Hua Cheng kissed his knuckles, his palm, the inside of his wrist. “It was my greatest honour to serve you, Your Highness.”

“I didn’t deserve it. What I did…”

“You were heart broken, abandoned, grieving. And still you changed your mind and gave humanity the chance they didn’t deserve.”

“I—” Xie Lian’s throat closed with emotion. When he thought back to that time in his life, he didn’t recognise himself. He recognised the grief, the helplessness, the fury, but not himself. Could he still be the same person after 2000 years? He had grown and morphed into something entirely new, but was he still himself, at his core? The same tenets and beliefs and motivations?

A silver butterfly landed on Xie Lian’s nose. Its wings were diaphanous, paper thin, but sharp as knives. Another joined, landing on his cheek. Another on the bow of his lip.

“Don’t be frightened, Gege.”

“I’m not frightened. One of your sweet little spies found me when your building was burning. I remember now. I should have been suspicious when it didn’t hurt me then.”

“They are a part of me. They would never hurt you.”

“I know.” The butterflies’ wings twitched, silver dusting Xie Lian’s cheeks. “San Lang’s butterflies are beautiful.”

“Does Gege still think I’m beautiful? Even now he’s seen my real face? He doesn’t think I’m a hideous monster?” Hua Cheng was grinning, but there was uncertainty in his black eye, a waver in his tone.

“San Lang,” Xie Lian whispered. His heart ached for the beautiful ghost in his arms, buried six feet under. “San Lang is the most beautiful. The most beloved.”

Hua Cheng’s lashes fluttered in the soft silver light, and he breathed a long, slow breath.

Xie Lian’s thigh vibrated, and he yelped in surprise. When he realised what it was, his eyes widened. “San Lang! My phone!”

They were so cramped in the small space, that Xie Lian couldn’t quite manoeuvre his hulking cell phone from his pocket, so Hua Cheng slipped his hand in and retrieved it just in time. The bright screen of his phone lit the interior of the coffin more than the butterflies.

“Feng Xin!” Xie Lian shouted as he answered the phone. “Are you all right? Did you and Mu Qing make it out okay? What about Wind Master?”

“Your Highness!” Feng Xin’s voice warbled. He sounded muffled and far away. He was speaking, but Xie Lian couldn’t quite hear. “...taken…him…n...safe?”

“Eh? Am I safe? I’m sorry, I can’t hear you!”

“Where the hell are you? Bai…” There was a muffled thump, and Xie Lin strained his ears. “...then the bastard tossed the dice in the air, and you both disappeared. Can you tell me where you are?”

“Feng Xin, I’m in a coffin with San Lang…I mean Hua Cheng.”

“In a coffin? With Hua Cheng? Did that bastard hurt you?”

Xie Lian shook his head. Hua Cheng watched him warily. “He would never hurt me.”

“He's a fucking ghost king! Why doesn't he use his spiritual powers to get you both out?"

Hua Cheng scoffed. "That fool."

"There's not getting out of this coffin, Feng Xin. We are sealed in. It's surprising I have cell service! Ha ha ha ha!"

"Where are you?” Feng Xin growled.

“I don’t know."

In the background, he could hear Shi Qingxuan and Gorgo’s anxious chatter. Mu Qing’s voice carried over the noise. “Give me the phone, you idiot. Xie Lian….try...lo… services...okay?”

“Huh?”

“Turn on the location services on your phone!”

“I…the what? Location services?”

“Yes, location services. It should be in the settings folder on your phone, you Luddite. If you turn it on, we can find…ou.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll look.” Xie Lian fumbled with his phone, looking for a settings folder. “Ah…ah, I found it!” But just as Xie Lian opened the folder and turned on his location services, his phone died. Xie Lian stared at the blank screen for a full minute, his heart sinking. Panic loomed in the dark corners of his mind. “At least we know they’re okay,” he mumbled.

“Your Highness,” Hua Cheng said with ferocity, “I will get you out of here. I will keep you safe. I will never let him near you again. Not ever.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about.”

“I can see that, Gege,” Hua Cheng said, and his expression darkened.

“Ah, San Lang, sorry. Sorry.”

The butterflies on his face gently flapped their wings a few more times before returning to Hua Cheng’s vambraces—beautiful, ornate vambraces, engraved with intricate butterflies and flowers—but a few still fluttered above them, setting the coffin interior aglow.

Hua Cheng watched him, his gaze searing. A gaze that has seen the depth of him. A shiver slipped down Xie Lian’s spine. This close, he could clearly see the similarities between his San Lang and the Supreme Ghost King Hua Cheng. The very same moon-pale skin, the same impossibly long lashes, the same slight point to his chin. The same glittering onyx eye. But Hua Cheng looked a little older than San Lang. His ears were slightly pointed, his canines sharp.

Hua Cheng.

Supreme Ghost King.

Chengzhu of Ghost City.

Scourge of the Heavens.

Xie Lian shivered again.

Ah, but it was his San Lang. It had always been his San Lang. Beautiful, dangerous, kind, cruel, generous, vengeful, immensely powerful. His.

And now his San Lang was trapped in a coffin again. Because of him.

The darkness pressed in on them. How far beneath the ground were they? Or were they in a tomb? How long before they ran out of air? How long would they be trapped here together? Xie Lian's newly mended heart spasmed around a phantom dowel. His breathing was strangled. Short puffs of hot air.

"San Lang…"

"Gege, it's okay. Don't think about it. Think about something else." Hua Cheng tucked a lock of hair behind Xie Lian's ear, his fingers lingering at his neck.

"Distract me? San Lang, distract me?"

"Gege, wanna get married?"

Xie Lian's brain short circuited. A rush of heat washed over his body, followed by a wash of ice. Then heat again. His heart stuttered, and his cheeks burned. All thoughts of the coffin forgotten.

"Don't—" Xie Lian's voice caught. "Don't tease me San Lang."

"I wouldn't dream of teasing Gege." Hua Cheng pressed their foreheads together. Xie Lian's heart was beating so hard, he was certain it filled the coffin.

"Yes," Xie Lian whispered.

“Yes, Gege wants to marry this wretched knave?”

“Yes. Your Gege wants to marry his beautiful ghost king. His precious Wu Ming. His San Lang. Yes.”

Hua Cheng was silent for a long moment. “Your Highness, may I kiss you?”

Xie Lian didn’t bother to answer. He pressed his lips to Hua Cheng’s.

It was different. A little. Hua Cheng’s mouth was slightly fuller, and the eyepatch scratched across his cheek, but it was his San Lang. His love. His breath was so sweet, his taste so sweet. His touch so gentle, as though Xie Lian was made of glass.The ring around his neck hummed softly as Hua Cheng’s lips moved against his.

“I never dared to dream I would have this with you,” Hua Cheng whispered against his mouth, and Xie Lian shivered. “It has always been the secret wish of my heart, but I can still hardly believe it. Your Highness, this lowly ghost will worship you for all eternity.”

“San Lang—” Xie Lian gasped as Hua Cheng licked into his mouth. He couldn’t get enough. He was wrung out with grief and overexposed adrenaline. With being impaled once more by the dowel. With Bai Wuxiang’s kiss. It was too much. It was suffocating him, and the only cure was Hua Cheng, San Lang. “I dreamed of you, too.”

“Gege,” San Lang whispered, and Xie Lian shivered as his long fingers slipped under the hem of his ruined shirt. He pressed his cool palm to the newly healed skin above Xie Lian’s heart.

They panted into each other’s mouths, hands roaming, small gasps in the dark. Hua Cheng laved his tongue across the seam of Xie Lian's lips, and they shuddered.

Something was building inside him. His skin felt tight and his heart hummed. He was restless. Desperate. Dizzy with love and need.

Gold sparked behind his eyes as he pressed closer to Hua Cheng, pressing their hard lengths together. The erotic brush of San Lang's tongue sent shivers of pleasure into his belly, and his blood fizzed.

The pressure in his chest grew denser and denser, and his skin tingled strangely. It took him a moment to realise it wasn't arousal building within him, but something else entirely. Ruoye vibrated at his wrist. The silk band moved strangely, twitching in a way similar to Hua Cheng's butterflies.

The silk band had done this before. Once. Unless his own memory had warped the past. And Xie Lian had felt this way before, too. This building energy. This sparking beneath his skin.

He jolted away from Hua Cheng.

"San Lang…" Golden sparks exploded behind his eyes.

"Gege, what's wrong?"

"I feel weird. I feel…I think…" All the hairs on his body stood on end. "I think I'm about to ascend."

Before Hua Cheng could reply, a thunderous boom shook the coffin, and a golden light blinded him. Golden-white heat seared his veins, cauterising the wound in his heart, lighting him from the inside out, a network of bones and ligaments and blood.

The pressure was so intense, he couldn't breath, and he convulsed violently, squeezing his eyes shut.

When he opened them again, he stood at the ascension gates in the Heavenly Capital.

Before him, stood the Heavenly Emperor. Jun Wu.

410, 757, 864, 530 JOYS Part Two

Chapter Notes

I LOVE YOU ALL SO MUCH! Guys, this chapter would NOT behave. I spanked it, ignored it, shamed it, guilted it, begged it...ah. Well. It is what it is. The sort-of last chapter. I will post the epilogue on Sunday, and it will be pure tooth-rotting fluffy fluff fluff, because I need it, and so maybe you do, too? I hope you like it, even if it is a wild, untamed thing. The end feels messy. Ah...but that kind of thing has never been my strength.

I think the major problem is this: I am obsessed. OBSESSED. With my new fic. Another multi-chapter bish. And this one...well. I hope it turns out like it is in my head. I will be posting the first chapter next week, so if you want to subscribe to me, I wouldn't be mad.

AND IF YOU WANT TO HECKLE ME, I WILL BASK IN IT. BASK.

Okay. One more to go. Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU FOR BEING SO WONDERFUL AND LOVELY AND FOR STICKING BY ME THROUGH THE MADNESS! WE ARE ALL BEST FRIENDS NOW!

One more thing. Before I let you go. Please. PLEASE. Go and read Red by Charis (Cerysblackheart) because holy fucking fuck. That is all.

It was an instinct of migration, a path worn in his soul—in spite of the centuries, in spite of his own self destruction, in spite of his broken cultivation.

During his formative years, godhood had been the flame of his soul, his drive, his reason for living. Was he so far removed from the 17-year-old prince who pleased the gods? Was he so very much changed from his former ideals and desires?

Xie Lian only remembered fragments of what his previous ascensions had contained. The cobalt blue of the sky. The chrome-bright buildings. The taste of mental on his tongue. But now, in his heart, he longed for the velvety haze of Ghost City. For the sharp edges and glittering chaos. He knew now where he belonged. In Hua Cheng’s arms. In the land beyond the veil.

A crowd had gathered around the Ascension Gates, all whispering loudly. There were very few gods he recognised. None seemed to know who he was at all, though most seemed surprised that the Heavenly Emperor had come to greet him.

The golden light of The Crown Prince of Xianle's ascension billowed through the bright streets. In the distance, the bell chimed his arrival, and pink petals whispered at his shoulders as he stood in the gilded gleam of the Heavens.

On the exterior, Xie was calm. His hands steady. But his mind reeled, and his heart rattled.

Jun Wu stood before him.

Bai Wuxiang, disguised in placid smiles and benevolent gazes.

"Majesty." Xie Lian bowed reverently—lower than was necessary. He needed the stolen moments to suck in his panic and steel himself. Was Hua Cheng safe? He needed to get back, but how? Would Jun Wu ever let him go again?

Jun Wu was Bai Wuxiang. Had always been Bai Wuxiang. Jun Wu didn't yet realise he knew the truth. Xie Lian swallowed back the taste of bile.

"Rise, Xianle. And welcome home. You have kept Heaven waiting far too long."

"Majesty," Xie Lian repeated as he rose once more. He thought he caught a flicker of unease in the Emperor's silvery eyes. Or maybe it wasn't unease at all. Maybe it was fury. Afterall, Xie Lian had arrived back in Heaven on his own, without his duplicitous aid. Jun Wu had extended a hand, but had been a trap from which Xie Lian would never have escaped.

Jun Wu didn't know he knew. He didn't know Xie Lian knew.

A wave of nausea crashed over Xie Lian as he realised it had been Jun Wu who had kissed him. Jun Wu, whom Xie Lian had once thought of as a mentor, kinder to him than his own father had ever been. Gentler. More supportive. More patient and understanding.

All the while, he was burning down Xie Lian's kingdom and tying him to altars. All the while, he was sealing Xie Lian's godhood with cursed shackles and encouraging him to unleash a plague of restless spirits upon Yong'an. All the while, he was ignoring 100 years worth of pleas from deep within a coffin and using Xie Lian's misfortune for his own benefit.

"Come, Xianle. There is much we must discuss." Jun Wu turned, hands clasped behind his back, and glided down the Grand Martial Avenue, the teeth of his dragon pauldrons gleaming silver bright in the invasive daylight. Behind them, the gods whispered in a chorus of gossip.

"Who is he? He must be someone important."

"He must be highly cultivated for such a destructive ascension. Geez."

"He obviously has the emperor's attention…"

"You fuckwits! That's His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince of Xianle! He's thousands of years old! And apparently he was once the strongest martial god."

"Wait, the God of Misfortune? I thought he was a myth!"

A god with a mane of wild red curls took out her smartphone and attempted to discreetly snap a photo.

"Yeah, he seems sus. And he's all covered in blood."

"He's a snack, tho."

“Seriously? That’s what you’re focussing on?”

Xie Lian ignored the whispers. He didn’t care. He didn’t care about heaven or the gods. He only cared about leaving.

Through the crowd, he spied Feng Xin and Mu Qing. Their faces were pale, their mouths drawn into thin lines. He gave them both a meaningful look before dropping his gaze and following after the Emperor.

Jun Wu led him to the Palace of Divine Might. Xie Lian had spent many months within these gilded halls, a shell of a man. He’d been emaciated and disoriented and so, so, so alone. Seeing it again curdled his stomach. He wished he was anywhere but here. Anywhere but so near to Jun Wu. To Bai Wuxiang.

The grand doors closed behind them with a boom, and Xie Lian’s breath caught. His skin itched and a wave of dizziness crashed over him. Carefully, he composed his expression, controlling the slow come-and-go of his breaths.

They made their way through the soaring halls, through echoing marble corridors, to Jun Wu’s private chambers. These were rooms Xie Lian was very familiar with. The airy courtyards and blossoming cherry trees, gauzy silver curtains and ornate furnishings. The air smelled of lemon and bergamot. Xie Lian’s belly roiled.

After Jun Wu had rescued him from the coffin, he’d kept Xie Lian confined in these rooms. Xie Lian had been in a bad way, certainly, certainly, but looking back…it seemed it took him an unnaturally long time to recover.

Jun Wu gestured to the bloodied front of his shirt. “I assume this is the work of Hua Cheng?”

“No, Majesty.” Xie Lian swallowed. “Not Hua Cheng. In fact, I bring grave news. Bai Wuxiang has returned. He has been impersonating Hua Cheng all this time.”

A long, artfully crafted silence. Jun Wu paled, and his lips turned down. A skilled actor.

“Hmn. This is grave news indeed. First we must tend to your wound. Then you will tell me all that has happened since we last spoke.” Jun Wu’s expression gave nothing away. No flicker of malice, or fear, or smugness. Only quiet concern for Xie Lian’s wellbeing. A skilled actor indeed. “Remove your soiled garments. I shall see to your wound myself.”

Icy panic slipped down Xie Lian’s spine. “Ah, Majesty. That is unnecessary. It has already been healed.”

“Oh? And how was it healed, pray tell? I was under the impression Xianle was without spiritual powers.”

“Indeed, Majesty. I have no spiritual power to speak of.” Xie Lian’s thoughts were moving too quickly. He had no choice. Only one weapon remained in his arsenal. He had no choice but to wield it. “Bai Wuxiang locked me back in the coffin. With Hua Cheng. It was Hua Cheng who healed my wound.”

“Xianle, Xianle, don’t tell me you’ve befriended a ghost king.”

“No, Majesty. I mean, I did, but unintentionally so. Remember the ghost friend I told you about?”

“Mnm.”

“Ah, well, it turns out you were right. I shouldn’t have trusted him. He was Hua Cheng in disguise. He deceived me. I have no idea what his plans were.” Xie Lian didn’t attempt to stifle his shudder. Let Jun Wu interpret it as he would.

Jun Wu's expression gave nothing away. He sighed heavily and lowered himself onto his throne. "Sit, Xianle."

Xie Lian knelt before the table. Three officials of Jun Wu's palace came bustling in with tea service and trays of food. They laid it all down on the table, and while Jun Wu wasn't watching them at all, one of them immediately caught Xie Lian's attention—a skinny Middle Court Official, with braided black hair and robes of Jun Wu's colours.

The boy's face was plain—ghostly-pale skin and dark eyes—not a face Xie Lian recognised—but it wasn't his appearance that had Xie Lian's heart racing. It was the T-shirt he was wearing, peeking out from beneath his silvery robes. It had a picture of a fawn across the front, and it read "Born to frolic, world is a garden, Love em all 1989, I am a happy fawn, 410, 757, 864, 530 JOYS".

Xie Lian stifled a gasp, and immediately reached for the tea pot to serve Jun Wu, his heart hammering in his chest. Was this Hua Cheng? Could it be? The Middle Court officials all stood off to the side, waiting to be summoned again.

"Now then, tell me what has happened." Jun Wu sighed, rubbing at his temple.

Xie Lian took a shuddering breath, pouring tea for himself. The smell of Jun Wu's particular blend turned his stomach, reminding him of the time he'd spent here recovering, but he sipped it anyway.

"Bai Wuxiang has returned. I met with him in Crimson Rain Sought Flower's Gambler's Den. It has been him impersonating Hua Cheng all this time."

"Hmm. This is dire indeed. It will have to be dealt with immediately."

"Your Majesty, I planned on reaching out to you, ascension or no. I cannot fight this battle on my own. I beg you, please help me."

“You finally seek my counsel? And just when I was ready to give up hope on you. It seems my little Xianle is all grown up now.”

“Ah, Majesty. Only thanks to the lessons I’ve learned from you.” It nearly pained him to say it. Bile burned in his throat, and his skin crawled, but if he didn’t gain Jun Wu’s trust, he might never be permitted to leave.

Jun Wu leaned forward, cupping his tea in his large hands. A lock of slippery silver hair tumbled over his shoulder, and he smiled serenely at Xie Lian. “And your relationship with the Ghost King Hua Cheng?”

“He lied to me. I can’t trust him. I can’t imagine his motives were anything other than sinister.” The Middle Court official with the fawn T-Shirt took a sharp breath, and Xie Lian’s belly burned. So it was Hua Cheng. It was his San Lang. Surely he knew Xie Lian was lying? Did Hua Cheng even realise that Xie Lian knew Jun Wu’s true identity? It didn’t matter. He would have to explain later. Now was not the time. “Majesty, you are the only one I can trust.”

In the courtyard beyond the hall, pink blossoms fluttered to the gleaming marble walkway. It was a perpetual spring in Heaven. An artificial spring. Nothing in Heaven was real.

“Xianle, try to understand. I have long suspected Crimson Rain Sought Flower and Bai Wuxiang were working in tandem. Certainly he and Black Water Sinking Ships have formed an alliance. We are living in dark times. I know friends are rare treasures for you, but ghosts cannot be trusted. Hua Cheng is dangerous. I shudder to think what plans he has for you.”

“I know that now, Majesty. I have seen his duplicity first hand. I won’t be fooled again.”

Jun Wu sighed. “Fine. Fine.” He waved a hand, and the three Middle Court officials stood at attention. “A bath will be drawn for you. Clean attire fetched. I know you prefer the fashions of the Mortal Realm, so I’ll have some brought to you. After a good rest, we shall descend together.”

“Majesty.”

Jun Wu rose to his feet and disappeared down the corridor, his heavy robes dragging behind him.

“This way, Your Highness,” the boy in the fawn shirt said. Xie Lian rose to his feet and followed the three officials toward the sleeping chambers.

The chamber Jun Wu had prepared for him was the same one he’d occupied during his recovery, and he stifled a shudder. The smells, the light, the familiar furnishing—he was terrified he might retch. Or worse, cry. The room was grand, larger than his rooms had been when he was a prince, with a well-tended courtyard and its own luxurious bathing chamber. The bath was more of a pool, really, submerged in the ground, the steaming surface littered with fragrant flower petals.

Two of the officials prepared the bath and bedding, while the boy in the fawn shirt attended to Xie Lian’s clothing, helping him undress. Xie Lian noticed the boy moved slowly. Precisely. As though he was buying time as he pulled Xie Lian’s bloodied sweater up over his head. The moment the other two were gone, Xie Lian spun on his heels and fell into the boy’s arms. He was of a height with Xie Lian. And skinny. But he smelled right. He smelled like home.

The boy stiffened, his hands hovering over Xie Lian without touching.

“San Lang,” Xie Lian whimpered, and the boy released a shaky breath. He shifted forms, and in a blink, Xie Lian was enveloped in strong arms, held tight against a broad chest. “San Lang, San Lang, San Lang!” he wailed, and Hua Cheng held him tighter.

“Gege,” he whispered against the top of Xie Lian’s head.

“How did you….how…ah…I—” Xie Lian shivered as Hua Cheng ran his fingers through his blood-matted hair.

“Your idiot servants arrived shortly after your ascension. The sad sweeping general was quick enough to see your location. There’s a first for everything.”

“Ah.” Xie Lian swallowed heavily. “Fang Xin Guoshi’s tomb, then?”

“En. Bai Wuxiang is one sick fuck.”

“And how did you get to Heaven? And so fast?”

“Your idiot servants are good for one or two things at least. He Xuan blew his cover, so that idiot was of no use. He’s pissed, but I told him Jun Wu would be dead within a few days, so it matters little.”

“But, how—”

“Gege,” Hua Cheng interrupted. “I need to get you out of here. Now.”

Xie Lian shook his head against the now tear-damped front of Hua Cheng’s shirt. “No. I have to stay. San Lang, I have to use this opportunity. I have to—” He swallowed hard against the taste of blood and bile. It was foolish to believe he could outwit Jun Wu, but he had to try. He had to take the risk, lest Bai Wuxiang’s reign of terror never ended. “I have an idea.”

“Gege knows, then? Bai Wuxiang’s true identity?”

Xie Lian nodded. A part of him had known for a long time, perhaps even during his recovery here in the Palace of Divine Might. It was the writhing in his belly, the ice down the knobs of his spine, the instinct to run.

Again, the memory of Jun Wu wearing Hua Cheng’s appearance slipped past his defences—Jun Wu’s lips and foul breath. It made him want to peel his own skin off.

Hua Cheng pulled away. He held Xie Lian's chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting his gaze up. His eyes, one black and one red gazed down at Xie Lian. "I can't lose you again."

"San Lang, you won't."

"Even though this one deceived you with his duplicitous nature?"

Xie Lian cringed and Hua Cheng smirked. "San Laaaang!"

"So Gege doesn't truly feel that way? That his San Lang can't be trusted?"

"If I felt that way, why would I have agreed to marry you?" Xie Lian kissed the tip of Hua Cheng's thumb, and the beautiful ghost shivered, his eyes falling closed.

"I thought I dreamed that." When Hua Cheng opened his eyes again, his gaze was seering. "Let's go get married right now. Let's jump to the mortal realm and make it official tonight."

Xie Lian breathed a laugh, giddiness and terror bubbling in his chest. It was an odd feeling. "Eh? And what about Bai Wuxiang?"

Hua Cheng huffed a laugh that sounded more anxious than soft. "Fine. If Gege insists on staying, he should at least wash away all this blood and dirt. And rest. Gege needs rest. I see that bastard hasn't removed the cursed shackles yet."

"Did you think he would?"

"No. Because if he did, you would be invincible."

The sun had nearly set by the time Hua Cheng and Xie Lian had stripped off their clothes and submerged themselves in the steaming bath, ensuring the doors were securely barred. This was Jun Wu's domain. Hua Cheng may be an all powerful ghost king, but if Jun Wu found them here together, there would be a lot of carnage.

"This is where I stayed," Xie Lian whispered as Hua Cheng lathered his hair. The whole of Heaven embodied a deep resonant hum that Xie Lian could vaguely feel in his teeth. He nestled into Hua Cheng's lap, his back against Hua Cheng's chest, his limbs floating. "After Jun Wu got me out of the coffin. It took me a long time to heal. I suspect Jun Wu didn't want me to heal."

Hua Cheng paused his ministrations. "I'm going to fucking kill him."

"If I'd known my Wu Ming had taken my place…"

"If I'd know that creepy fuck planned to take you to Heaven and keep you, I would have found another way of getting to you. I should have paused to consider."

"It's not your fault, San Lang. You saved me. If you hadn't, I might still be—" His voice cracked, and he shuddered.

"Don't think like that, Gege. We are together now." San Lang rinsed the shampoo from Xie Lian's hair and peppered gentle kisses just below his ear. The golden light of the paper lanterns bobbing in the courtyard painted the surface of the water.

"How did San Lang find me in the bookshop after so many centuries? It seems like too much of a coincidence that I would have somehow just taken a job in Gorgo's shop."

"Mnm. It was no coincidence. Gorgo put out a summoning spell along with the job posting. Of course, Your Highness would have had to be within a 50 li radius, so fate did play its part as well. The job posting had been up for nearly 25 years. No applicants were ever quite right."

“Ha ha ha ha! San Lang! A summoning spell? But those are dangerous! Ah, and wouldn’t you have needed to have something of mine for such a spell?”

Hua Cheng was uncharacteristically quiet for a long moment. “I had something of yours.”

“Eh?”

Xie Lian twisted in his arms, floating his legs up to straddle the ghost king. Their noses brushed, and Hua Cheng’s sweet breath ghosted across his lips. Desire fizzed low in Xie Lian’s belly as their soft cocks brushed. Xie Lian’s cheeks burned, but he couldn’t help but place a small kiss in the corner of Hua Cheng’s mouth. Hua Cheng’s arms tightened around his waist.

“What did you have of mine, San Lang?”

There was a flicker of uncertainty in Hua Cheng’s eyes. “May I appear before you in my true form again, Your Highness?”

“Of course. San Lang needn’t hide himself. Not with me.”

In a blink, Hua Cheng shifted, his appearance morphing into something not so far off from the face he’d always shown Xie Lian—something sinister and beautiful, but still his San Lang. His raven feather hair was longer, thicker. The tattoos were gone, all but one—a strange, foreign script on the inside of his forearm. Hua Cheng’s limbs grew longer, his shoulders slightly broader. His crimson eye was replaced by a black eyepatch. A single braid rested against the slender pillar of his neck. At the end of the braid, a red coral bead, bobbing just below the surface of the water.

“Does Gege remember catching that tiny terror of a boy during the God-Pleasing Parade back in Xianle?”

“Hong’er. I could never forget you.” Xie Lian closed his eyes. The day of the Shang Yuan Festival was a distant dream, blurred around the edges. He remembered the tiny boy clutching his robes, his bandaged face, his anguished cries. He remembered his guoshi’s dismay. Mu Qing’s fury, when the red coral earring had gone missing…

“Ah…” Xie Lian breathed a sigh. He opened his eyes. He fished for the red pearl at the end of Hua Cheng’s braid and held it up to the soft, golden light.

“I stole it.”

Xie Lian burst into giggles. “Rightly so. My Little Red must be adorned in the finest of crimson jewels. I would settle for nothing less.”

Hua Cheng didn’t return his mirth. “Everything I am today is because of Dianxia. I live because of Dianxia. Ghost City is for Dianxia. My protection is for Dianxia. I lived for you, and I will die for you, my prince, my god, my love.”

Words caught in Xie Lian’s throat. The energy gathered around them shifted, and the walls of his soul shuddered. This man, this ghost—his past, his present, his future. Xie Lian breathed out a slow breath. “No more dying. I asked you to live for me, didn’t I?”

“I’m already dead, Your Highness.”

“Ah, that isn’t how it looks from here. You are more alive than I have ever been. What I’ve been doing this past 2000 years, that wasn’t living. That was existing. I existed. Until I met you. Until I saw your beautiful city, so full of life.” Xie lian laughed. It was a strange laugh, warped around the edges. “Isn’t it funny? Ghost City is the most alive place I’ve ever been. And its king? A beacon of vitality. You, San Lang, I—” His words caught on a sob.

“Dianxia…”

“No. No, I’m not a prince—not anymore. San Lang. Please. I’m your gege. Please…”

“Gege.”

Hua Cheng’s mouth brushed against his. So soft. Slow. And they were kissing, sensations liquid and throbbing. Xie Lian was at a loss, his body moving of its own volition. His arousal was bright and hot, sparkling and dense. Hua Cheng smelled so good, Xie Lian’s mouth watered.

He licked at Hua Cheng’s lips, licked into his mouth, crazed with desire—heat, friction, shiver. His cock hardened, slippery with soap, and he bucked his hips against Hua Cheng. Their naked cocks slid together, but it wasn’t enough. Xie Lian needed more.

He was starved—it almost hurt, the need. The heated desire.

Hua Cheng’s clever fingers traced down his spine, slipping between his ass cheeks, and Xie Lian gasped, his back arching. Hua Cheng licked at his neck, his collar bones, and he bit down on Xie Lian’s peaked nipple.

“Ah…ah…San Lang! San Lang!”

“Gege, I want to eat you alive.”

Hua Cheng’s finger slid inside him, and a cascade of stars pricked behind his eyelids, his body alive with sensation as he slid his slipper erection against Hua Cheng’s belly, sometimes rubbing their cocks together. Xie Lian was shivering, throbbing, panting.

“I want to taste you, feel you, devour you…” Hua Cheng’s words were whispered against his throat, the velvety-deep tones vibrating down to his twitching cock. “Nothing will ever be enough for me. Taizi Dianxia, my god, don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid.”

Xie Lian caught his mouth in a sloppy kiss. Hua Cheng slid another finger inside.

“Gege…Gege…Your Highness…”

“San Lang!” Xie Lian wailed as Hua Cheng added a third finger and his brain short circuited. His body was awash with pleasure unknown.

In one swift motion, Hua Cheng stood, his fingers still buried in Xie Lian’s ass, Xie Lian’s legs wrapped around his waist. Water cascaded down around them in a sloosh.

Through the grand archway and back to the bedchamber. Hua Cheng layed Xie Lian’s naked, gleaming body on the bed and crawled on top of him. He swooped down and consumed Xie Lian’s mouth, sucking on his tongue, all the while sliding their slippery cocks together until Xie Lian moaned into Hua Cheng’s mouth.

Pressure. Heat. Touch.

And Hua Cheng was inside him. Xie Lian was so full, so achingly full—pain sharpening pleasure, pleasure sharpening want, want sharpening need.

“San Lang!” Xie Lian whimpered as Hua Cheng fucking him into the mattress. The pleasure surged and bloomed, and Xie Lian’s desire spilled out. Hua Cheng soon followed.

They gasped for breath in the darkness until they fell asleep.

Xie Lian woke up knowing something was wrong. The doors to his room opened, and three Middle Court Officials entered. One, a skinny boy with black hair and black eyes, wore a T-shirt that said, “don’t put me in a situation” across the front.

Xie Lian sat up in bed, the sheets pooling around his hips. A breakfast tray was set out before him, and a stack of carefully starched designer clothing. For a moment, through the fog of

dreaming, he feared his time with Hua Cheng, too, had been a dream. That he was still trapped within the walls of the Palace of Divine Might, helpless to even walk on his own—a wraith, an almost-corpse. But the boy, the one with the black eye and black hair, paused for a moment when delivering his breakfast tray.

“Dianxia,” he whispered, “I shall see you in the Mortal Realm.”

And then he was gone.

Xie Lian breathed a shuddering sigh. He attempted to eat his breakfast, but his belly roiled, and his mouth was dry.

Jun Wu arrives just after he’s dressed. “Xianle. These rooms suit you well. As it will take you time to accrue enough merits to rebuild Xianle Palace, I pray you will consider staying with me here.”

“Majesty.” Xie Lian bowed low, his hands clasped. “Thank you for the generous offer. I would like nothing more.”

There was a sparkle of something strange in Jun Wu’s eyes. He offers Xie Lian his arm, and the two depart for the Mortal Realm.

***

They arrived in the former Yong’an. Now a bustling metropolis with few ties to its ancient ancestor. Would Xianle have prevailed had it not been plagued? Did anything prevail? Hua Cheng had prevailed. And against all odds, Xie Lian had prevailed.

Or perhaps Yong’an had prevailed and everything was how it always was. This was the same soil, the same sun, generations of the same people. Though the once-grande palace was now a ruin, places held memories like time capsules. The past was never really gone.

They walked through busy streets, taxis spraying rainwater onto the sidewalks, the air redolent of smoked meat and cooking grease. Fang Xin's tomb had once been in the outskirts of the city, surrounded by a grove of peach trees. Now it, too, was a ruin encapsulated by the inner city, surrounded by towering buildings. Buried beneath a parkade.

As they walked, Jun Wu smiled softly down at him. Xie Lian stifled a shudder and smiled back.

Jun Wu wore a gaudy silver suit over a pale blue button up, and while the clothes were modern and certainly expensive, they looked ridiculous.

"How does Xianle plan to confront Hua Cheng once we retrieve him from the coffin? If he is still in the coffin, mind. A ghost king won't be locked away for long."

"Hmn." Xie Lian dodged a boy on a skateboard and avoided Jun Wu's gaze. "I want to bring him back to the Heavenly Capital for questioning. Perhaps Your Majesty is correct and Hua Cheng does know of Bai Wuxiang's whereabouts. In which case we can put an end to this for good."

"And then what does Xianle plan to do with himself? We have great need of him in Heaven. A talent like his. He would be an asset."

Xie Lian forced a smile. "I am at your service, Majesty. Perhaps you will guide me?"

Jun Wu didn't respond, but Xie Lian could tell he was pleased.

They came to a parking garage and descended the concrete stairs. At the bottom of the steps was a wooden door leading to an underground tunnel. Xie Lian took a shaky breath. Enough time had elapsed that Xie Lian had processed the trauma of the coffin, but some things lived in one's very cells. And the closer they came to the coffin, the more Xie Lian struggled to breathe.

Jun Wu lit a palm torch as the tunnel narrowed. Soon enough, they came upon the tomb. The doors hung off their hinges. The three layered coffin thrown open. It was empty.

The Heavenly Emperor tutted. “It was to be expected.”

“Gege.” Hua Cheng’s voice came from behind them—from the direction they’d just come.

Slowly Xie Lian turned around. Hua Cheng stood in the dimly lit passageway. He wore crimson robes of the finest silks, his black boots decorated in silver bells. Ornate silver jewellery hung around his neck and shoulders, and at his side, E-Ming rattled in his scabbard. It took every fibre of Xie Lian’s restraint not to throw himself into Hua Cheng’s arms.

“Lord Crimson Rain.” Xie Lian’s voice was cold. Empty. He was relieved it didn’t shake.

Hua Cheng sneered, his boots jingling as he sauntered closer. “I see you’ve brought a friend. I guess that means you aren’t here to reconcile with me.”

“Why would I? How could I ever trust you again after the lies you’ve told?” It hurt to say it, and he could see it hurt Hua Cheng to hear it, even though they both knew it was an act.

Of course there was a part of him that had always feared Hua Cheng would leave. Everyone had always left. For 2000 years he’d been alone. And, quite frankly, Hua Cheng was too good, too loving, too wonderful—Xie Lian didn’t deserve him. Of course he feared. Why wouldn’t Wu Ming be furious with him for his selfish recklessness? Why wouldn’t Hua Cheng blame Xie Lian for his death—for the fall of Xianle?

But Hua Cheng had awoken something in him. Something new. Something fragile and beautiful and still. Still like home. Still like the moment between the shifting in seasons. Still like the peace he’d felt since San Lang had found him again.

And Xie Lian trusted. It was scary, but he trusted Hua Cheng. And he loved him as he had never loved before. Nothing else mattered. Not even his own ridiculous fears—fears that were a product of his own grief. Not reality.

“I keep telling Dianxia, it wasn’t an act, but a curse. Placed upon me by Bai Wuxiang.”

“I know you’re lying,” Xie Lian spat, his heart breaking. He could only pray Hua Cheng knew his heart. “I know you and Bai Wuxiang are working together. Just like you’re working together with Black Water Sinking Ships. Just admit it!”

“I would never work with that trash.”

Jun Wu stepped between them. “Now, now, Lord Ghost King. Would you be willing to testify before the Heavenly Court to prove your innocence?”

Hua Cheng’s long fingers, nails painted matte black, curled around E-Ming’s hilt. “I don’t owe shit to Heaven. Lowlife fucks can shove it.”

“Then we have no choice but to take you against your will. Xianle, would you care to do the honours?” Jun Wu offered Xie Lian his palm. Xie Lian took it, and intense spiritual energy saturated his body.

“I would, yes. Thank you, Majesty. I only have one question before we begin.”

“Taizi Dianxia, I will answer any questions you have for me,” Hua Cheng pleaded.

“Ah, thank you. But my question is actually for His Majesty the Heavenly Emperor.”

The clattering of bones echoed through the tunnel. The air was suddenly saturated with the sharpness of brine.

Xie Lian spun around, searching for the source. “Who’s there?”

“More tricks, Lord Ghost King?” Jun Wu smirked, his eyes flashing golden bright.

Hua Cheng shrugged, picking at his nails. “How is one to out trick the trickster?”

“What are you playing at, San Lang? I want answers!”

Hua Cheng grinned wildly. “I’m San Lang again? Hmm, I knew you couldn’t stay away, Your Highness.”

Before Xie Lian could retort, a spiritual arrow soared through the air and embedded in the heavy wooden door of the tomb. From the shadows, Mu Qing and Feng Xin appeared, armed to the teeth.

“Taizi Diaxia!” Feng Xin cried. “We have come to help you defeat the ghost king.”

Jun Wu’s smile remained placid. “Your generals certainly are devoted, Xianle. Nan Yang, Xuan Zhen, place Crimson Rain Sought Flower under arrest.”

“Not that ghost king,” Mu Qing sneered. “You. Bai Wuxiang.”

Something dark flashed in Jun Wu’s eyes.

“Majesty? What are they talking about?” Xie Lian knew his eyes were wide, his tone panicked. It wasn’t hard to affect, when he really was panicked. His heart thundered in his ears, and his jaw clenched. If this went wrong, they were all dead.

“This,” Hua Cheng said. E-Ming flew from its place at Hua Cheng’s side, hovering right at Jun Wu’s neck. But it didn’t attack. No wound marred Jun Wu’s pale neck. E-Ming had only unhooked something from under Jun Wu’s shirt. A silver chain. And at the end of the silver chain, a delicate silver butterfly.

The clattering of bones grew louder. A sudden roaring filled Xie Lian’s ears. When he looked up, a torrent of water gushed through the narrow tunnel, sweeping around their ankles. And in the water’s heavy current, long, pale skeleton fish, snapping their maws.

A tall figure emerged from the end of the tunnel clad all in black, his eyes burning deep indigo. Another, smaller figure behind him. Narrow shoulders, frizzy red hair, an elegant brow.

Gorgo.

“Do you see his treachery, Xianle? Do you see how he deceives you? He has brought another ghost king along to capture you. All he wants is revenge for the deaths you bestowed upon him. And he’s brought the Curse Collector with him. How interesting.”

“Majesty! How…why are you wearing that necklace?” Xie Lian cried, attempting to steal his attention back. He’d known Bai Wuxiang was in possession of the necklace. But fury consumed him nonetheless.

Jun Wu turned his cold gaze on Xie Lian. “I think you know.”

Searing pain shot through Xie Lian, his throat constricting. The shackle! The shackle was cutting off his breath!

“Your Highness!” Mu Qing and Feng Xin called.

Black spots blotted out his vision, and Xie Lian collapsed to his needs, writhing and thrashing. All he could hear was the thudding of his own heart in his ears and the low rumble

of Jun Wu's laughter. The pain was exquisite. The kind of pain he used to long for, back when the world was filled with nothing and no one. But now? Now he realised for the first time in a long time that he feared death.

E-Ming flashed, and blood splattered across his face. Not his own blood. Jun Wu's.

The shackle around his neck released, and Xie Lian gasped for breath, wheezing and coughing.

"Xianle, Xianle." Blood dripped down Jun Wu's front, a crooked smile carved into his cheek. His exposed teeth gleamed in the dim light of the cave for a moment before the wound E-Ming had bestowed healed. "You never learn, do you."

A volley of Feng's Xin's spiritual arrows flew through the air, like a V of shimmering birds, hitting Jun Wu in the chest. With a laugh and a flick of his wrist, Jun Wu sent Feng Xin and Mu Qing flying.

"You are alone, Xianle. You will always be alone. I am the only one who will always be here for you."

Hua Cheng laughed, a wild, manic laugh. "You aren't some saviour. You're nothing but a jealous old man."

Xie Lian flipped to his feet, and with the grace of a dancer and the speed of a martial god, launched himself at Jun Wu. He snatched the silver butterfly necklace from around his neck, clasping it firmly in his fingers.

It was hot in his hands—too hot. It hummed softly, and when Xie Lian looked down, the necklace had changed shape in his palm. It was no longer a necklace, but a dowel. A familiar dowel, with strange writing on it.

His eyes shot to Gorgo, who was performing a series of hand seals, a determined look in his red eyes.

“You won’t ever change, will you. Xianle, how disappointing.” Jun Wu’s eyes flashed, and he wrapped his large hand around Xie Lian’s neck, lifting him into the air. His eyes gleamed with mania, and a paralysing jolt went through Xie Lian. He couldn't breath. He couldn't breathe. Jun Wu's finger's squeezed, and just when he thought he would pass out, Jun Wu threw him bodily, and he landed with a crash.

Inside the coffin.

“Gege!” Hua Cheng roared, and the sharp scent of brine filled the air.

Jun Wu was standing over him. Gone was the placid smile. Gone was the look of benevolence. He didn’t need the half-smiling, half-crying mask. The look of hatred in his silvery eyes could belong to none other than Bai Wuxiang.

“I think another hundred years in the coffin might teach you a lesson, hmn?”

Xie Lian shot to his feet. His head was pounding, and he felt a little dizzy. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. In one fell swoop, and with a series of brutal blows, he took Jun Wu off guard. A swift kick to the side of the head, a punch to the ribs, and though Jun Wu spat blood, he grinned. He launched himself at Xie Lian, and, using the momentum, Xie Lian plunged the dowel into Jun Wu’s heart.

A look of shock and fury flashed across Jun Wu’s face, but as he fell, his eyes filled with a strange sadness. He landed on top of Xie Lian—into the coffin, the lid crashing down on them. Xie Lian’s shackles shattered.

Darkness closed around him, his heart hammering in his throat. But before he could well and truly panic, strong hands grasped him, pulling him out from beneath Jun Wu's dead weight.

Pulling him up into the light.

Heckling Is Love

Chapter Notes

My dear friends! Here we are at last! I want to thank you all so much for joining me on this journey! For supporting me and leaving me comments that make me bawl my eyes out. I love you all SO SO SO SO SO SO MUCH! Do you know this? Do you know how much I love and adore you? I HECKLE YOU ALL! HECKLES FOR YOU! HECKLE HECKLE HECKLE!

Well. There is a new multi-chapter fic in the works. The hurtiest comfortiest thing I've ever dreamed up. The new chapter will be up this week. I write it for you because I love you.

Again, thank you.

Follow me on Tumblr here if you want! I bite!

He dreamed he was in the coffin.

Granules of dirt embedded beneath his fingernails, earth compacted down his throat. Pressure built in his ears. A strange humming. Vibrations through his bones—through the earth surrounding his coffin, shaking loose reams of centipedes and spiders.

Xie Lian turned over in bed. Soft puffs of sweet breath brushed his lips, and Hua Cheng hummed softly in his sleep. Somewhere in the distance, music played and laughter carried like chimes through the streets of Ghost City.

Dreaming took him deeper.

The walls of the coffin pressed in on him, invisible but weighty. It had been 100 years since he'd taken a breath, and his lungs were dried husks, collapsed and dusty. His moments of life were fleeting—bright hot pain and suffocation interrupted by dragging hours of sucking death.

And he was alone, alone, alone.

Darkness again, then a spark of consciousness as his heart slipped over a new beat and jerked violently around the dowel.

"Gege."

The humming bothered his ears—ached between his teeth—but it was fine. Only seconds remained. He would be dead again in a moment. Xie Lian's heart shuddered and thrashed.

Hot blood flooded beneath his red-lacquered robes, pooling along his clavicle—along the pale pillar of his neck. Drops of blood shivered and jumped at his pulse points.

“Gege.”

Xie Lian turned his head.

San Lang lay beside him in the coffin, his fire and shadow eyes glinting in the darkness.

“Gege, it is a heavy curse. But the load is lightened with you at my side.”

Cool arms tightened around his waist, and a soft sigh penetrated the veil of dreaming. Warmth saturated his heart.

Xie Lian opened his eyes.

He was in bed. Safe and warm, wrapped in Hua Cheng’s arms. They shared one of the twin beds now, the blankets pulled up tight to keep away the chill. Heavy rain thudded against the windows. Xie Lian’s fingers were curled around the ring of Hua Cheng’s ashes against his heart. The ring hummed faintly, and Xie Lian smiled softly into the darkness.

He wasn’t alone.

“Gege,” Hua Cheng whispered in his sleep.

“San Lang.” Xie Lian pressed a soft kiss to his beloved's temple. Soon, he drifted back to sleep.

***

“Chengzhu! Welcome back!”

“GOOD EVENIN, YER ‘OL LORDSHIP!”

“He’s brought Grand Uncle with him!”

“Grand Uncle! Congratulations on the wedding!”

“Is it true Grand Uncle nailed the Heavenly Emperor into a coffin? Way to go, Grand Uncle! Truly an impressive feat!”

"That bastard has nothing on Grand Uncle and Chengzhu! Serves him fucking right!"

Despite the thundering skies and the deluge of rain, Ghost City was in full celebration mode. Red lanterns swayed in the glistening streets and mist curled through the Ghost Market. It was raining, but the air was sharp with the scent of snow. Soon winter would come.

“Grand Uncle, you’ve been married for over a month now! Where are the babies? We want to see the babies! Your tummy is still so flat!”

Xie Lian’s cheeks flushed hot, and he hid his face in his hands.

“Scram!” Hua Cheng said, and the ghosts skittered off, though not far. They watched and laughed and heckled from a safe distance as Xie Lian and the Ghost King wandered through the maze of street vendors. There was a time when Xie Lian might not have known what to make of the heckling. But now he knew: heckling was love.

Xie Lian’s arms were laden with gifts. Bouquets of flowers ‘fittin of the Flower Crowned Martial God’, foul smelling candies, delicate jewellery buzzing with evil aura, a book of queer literotica, which had made Xie Lian turn bright red, and even warm mantou wrapped in cloth. The denizens of Ghost City were generous beyond compare. Xie Lian had never felt so at home.

They bought a bag of curry popcorn from a stall, but Xie Lian’s arms were so full, Hua Cheng had to feed it to him. Xie Lian didn’t mind. The only popcorn for him was plain salt and butter, but this was a nice treat.

“Oh, just a moment, San Lang! I have…ah…I’ll be right back.” Xie Lian offered Hua Cheng a bright smile, dumping all the gifts into Hua Cheng's arms, and took off through the crowd, braving the heckling without the Ghost King at his side.

When he returned several minutes later, Hua Cheng eyed him curiously. “Gege is keeping secrets from his San Lang?”

“En. Secrets.” Xie Lian tried to hide his smile as he tucked a cloth-wrapped package into his sleeve.

They arrived at the bookshop an hour before closing. The bells chimed and rain pelted the windows with ferocity. The low lantern flickered.

He Xuan, or, Black Water Sinking Ships, stood behind the counter lecturing the new girl—a pretty wee ghost, with wavy brown hair, long lashes, and scales like a koi fish—on the inventory system. He rolled his eyes when he saw Xie Lian and Hua Cheng.

Gorgo came around the corner, his wild hair a rainbow of pastels, and his eyes wide. He carried a wooden box that rattled and hissed as he walked. “Ah. You two. I’m glad I caught you.”

“What.” Hua Cheng glared.

“Hello, Gorgo!” Xie Lian smiled warmly.

“Right. I need the room upstairs back. Since you two don’t work here anymore. I mean, I assume you don’t.”

“We don’t need your shitty room.”

“San Lang!”

Gorgo didn’t seem to notice Hua Cheng’s rudeness. Or perhaps he was just used to it. “Tonight? My new employee, one who doesn’t bring viscous calamities to my doorstep, mind, needs the room.”

Xie Lian laughed, though his heart sank. He had become tethered to the bookshop and the room above it. It was his sanctuary. His safe haven. His home with Hua Cheng. “Certainly, certainly, Gorgo. We shall clear out immediately.”

"Oh, and, Your Highness?" Gorgo smiled—a real smile. "Congratulations on your wedding."

Back in their room, Xie Lian packed their now-impressive mug collection into a box. He stared down at a mug that said “my wife went to Ghost City and all I got was this shitty mug” across the front and sighed. “I’ll miss this place. It was the first real home I’ve ever had.”

Hua Cheng wrapped his arms around Xie Lian’s waist from behind, kissing the top of his head. “Mine, too, Gege. But, in truth, home is wherever you are. I can rest my head on this shoulder”—he demonstrated by dramatically nuzzling Xie Lian’s neck—“and receive nourishment from this body of a thousand gold when I'm hungry.” He nipped at Xie Lian’s ear.

“San Lang!” Xie Lian whined, his cheeks flushing. Would living in Ghost City entail a life of perpetual embarrassment. He rested the mug in the box.

“Hmn. But if Gege is not opposed, I have a suggestion.”

“Eh? What kind of suggestion?”

“Gege deserves the best. Only the best. Anything Gege wants, this San Lang will oblige.” Hua Cheng kissed the top of Xie Lian’s head again, and it suddenly occurred to him that his beloved was nervous. “I have built a home for His Highness. It has been sitting in wait. But if it is not to Gege’s taste, of course we will find something different. But for tonight at least, perhaps Gege would like a hot bath and a good meal? A comfortable bed?”

“San Lang has built us a home?” Xie Lian frowned thoughtfully. “Is it Paradise Manor?”

A long pause.

“It is indeed Paradise Manor.”

Xie Lian smiled softly, his heart skipping a beat. He turned in Hua Cheng’s arms and buried his face in his chest. “My husband is so good to me. So, so good. I would be overjoyed to call Paradise Manor home.”

“Gege hasn’t even seen it yet.” Hua Cheng’s voice was a little quiet. A little uncertain.

“If San Lang built it, I will love it. If San Lang is there, it is home.”

Thunder crashed, and the rain pounded the windows. The lanterns swayed.

“Ah, San Lang, that reminds me.” Xie Lian fished in his sleeve for the package he bought in the market. He unwrapped the cloth. Inside was a tiny, delicate, silver butterfly necklace. This was smaller and more delicate than the last, but the diaphanous mesh of the wings was so intricate, it was nearly translucent. If he'd seen this one first, it would have been his choice.

Hua Cheng didn’t speak a word as Xie Lian clasped it around his neck.

“There,” Xie Lian whispered, his voice weaving into the din of the rain. “Now you will have something of me, too.”

Hua Cheng stared down at him, his onyx eye glittering.

Xie Lian had never felt so seen. So full. So loved.

“Well, San Lang? Shall we go home?”

Hua Cheng kissed him.

Beyond the windows, Ghost City teemed with life and joy.

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